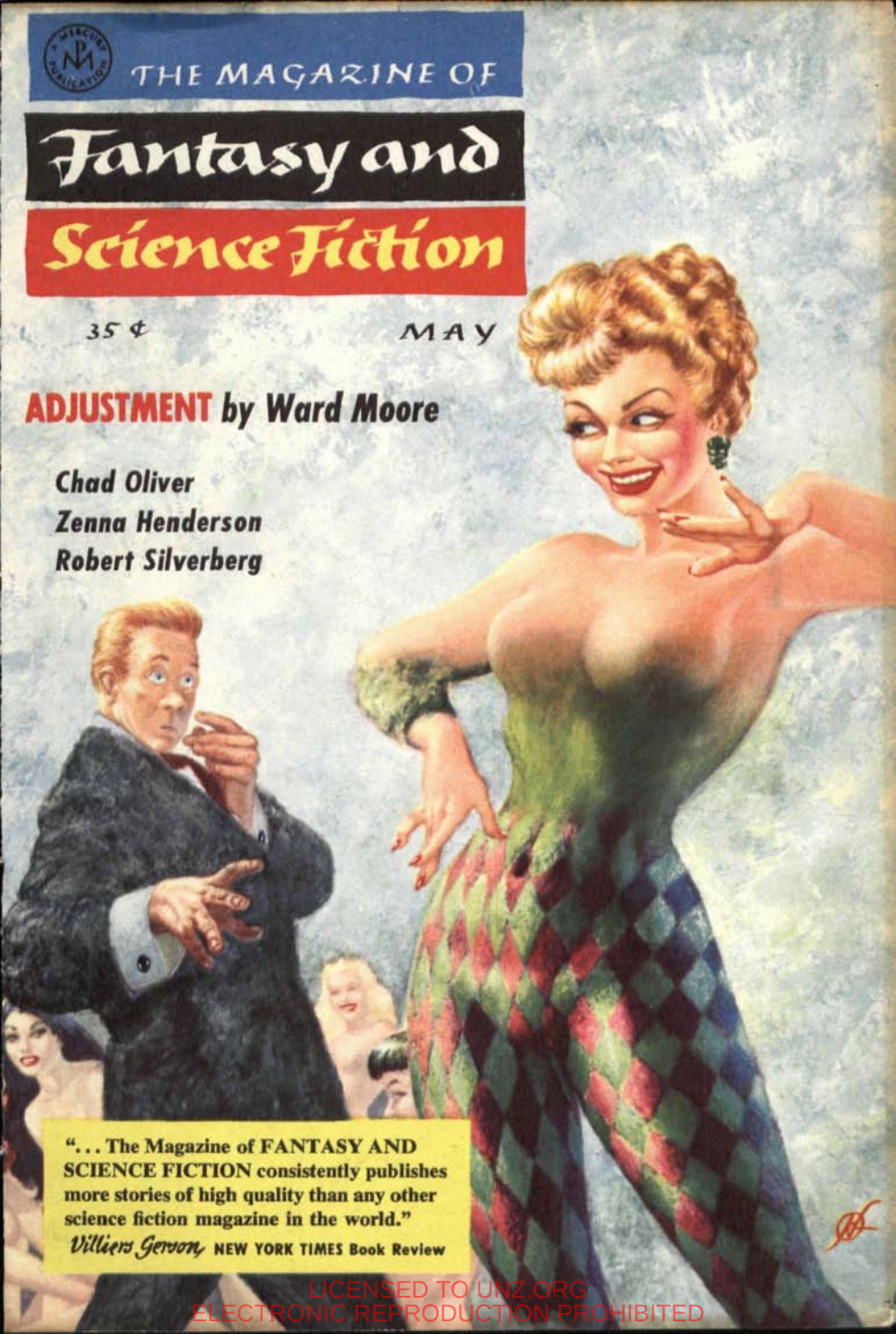
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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 12, No. 5 MAY

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(*illustrating Adjustment*)

Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER *Anthony Boucher*, EDITOR

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Between the Thunder and the Sun

by CHAD OLIVER

And least of all he holds the human swarm—
Unwitting now that envious men prepare
To make their dream and its fulfillment one.
When, poised above the caldrons of the storm,
Their hearts, contemptuous of death, shall dare
His roads between the thunder and the sun.

George Sterling

IT BEGAN AS A PERFECTLY ORDINARY day.

Evan Schaefer woke up a little after nine in the morning, which meant that he was a few minutes behind schedule and would have to hustle to make his first class on time. That was normal; it happened to him every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Tuesday and Thursday were better, because he had no classes before noon.

He piled out of bed, noted that his wife Lee was still asleep, and stumbled blearily into the kitchen where he punched the preset breakfast button. He yawned, decided that the house was a little on the cool side, and glanced into the scope. No one was below him. He flicked on the warning beam and lowered the house down to three thousand feet. Then he readjusted the window pattern for the prevailing wind system. A warm, balmy breeze drifted into the house.

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Golden sunlight touched the imitation redwood surfaces.

"Much better," Evan Schaefer muttered. He was proud of his house. They had had to cut corners on his professor's salary, but with the children gone—

He shut off the thought before the pain came.

He showered, dressed in his blue coverall, and did hurried justice to three poached eggs on toast, sausage links, and two cups of steaming fragrant coffee.

He glanced at his watch. It was going to be close. He knew he was forgetting something, but for a moment he couldn't place it. Something Bill had wanted . . .

Snapping his fingers, he ran up the curving ramp to his skylight study. His eyes ran over the shelves of books, tapes, and films.

"Boas, Boas," he said to himself. "Kwakiutl, Annual Report—"

The book should have been in the old Bureau of American Ethnology series, back around 1920. He found it finally, on the wrong shelf, in a microfilm edition.

He hurried back down the ramp and into the garage. The roof slid aside when he climbed into the copter cabin. He jetted up into the open sky and cut in the blades. The copter was too small for an antigravity unit, but he usually enjoyed the flight to the university.

Not when he was this late, however.

He took her up to the fast traffic lane and eased into the stream. He flew for five minutes over the rich green forest and then landed on the roof of his university office. He ducked down into it, snatched up his notes from his cluttered desk, and rode the elevator down into the underground lecture hall.

He was three minutes late when he mounted the platform and faced the five hundred students and the TV pickup.

"Good morning," he said. "Where were we, anyhow?"

The blonde in the front row made a big occasion out of checking her notes. "Something about the Oedipus transfer," she said.

She pronounced it *Eddie-puss,* of course.

Schaefer nodded.

"We were talking about the shift in the locus of authority to the mother's brother in some societies with matrilineal descent," he said. "Now, you'll remember that when Malinowski . . ."

The rest was routine.

There was nothing at all to indicate that this day was different from any other day.

When the class was over and he had disposed of last-minute questions from the eager-beavers, he took the elevator back up to his office. He felt drained, as he always did after a lecture. It was precisely the same feeling an actor had after giving a performance.

The word was *limp.*

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He needed a few minutes with his pipe, and then some coffee with Bill. After that, he could face his advanced class on multilinear cultural evolution—tougher than his introductory sections, but more stimulating for him.

He stuck his key in the lock, opened the door to his office, and stepped inside.

He stopped.

There was a man in his office. Schaefer had never seen him before. He didn't look like a student. The man was tall, with a face that might have been handsome had it not been for the lines of strain around the full mouth. He was around 50 years old. There was an ashtray filled with cigarette butts by his right hand.

"Dr. Schaefer?" The voice was tense, as though the man was controlling it with difficulty.

"Well?" Schaefer was not alarmed, but he was annoyed.

"I would appreciate it if you locked the door," the man said.

"How did you get in here?"

"With a key."

Schaefer frowned, then checked the door. "It's locked."

The man relaxed, just a little. "My name is Benito Moravia," he said, and waited.

The name rang a vague bell, but Schaefer couldn't quite place it. He was reasonably sure that he had no Moravia in any of his classes, but then this man didn't have the look of a worried parent about him.

Moravia took a deep breath. "I'm head of the UN Extraterrestrial Division," he said. "I thought you might have heard of me; I hope you'll excuse the vanity."

Schaefer snapped his fingers. "Of course!" He shook hands with Moravia. "You took me by surprise, sir."

"I meant to."

Schaefer eyed the man. He *was* worried about something. "What can I do for you?"

Moravia laughed, shortly. "First of all, you can swear to me that what I tell you in this room will never be passed on to a living soul without my permission." He spread his hands helplessly. "This damned melodrama, this secrecy, it makes me sick. I have no choice, do you see?"

Schaefer felt a tiny electric thrill tingling through him. He was suddenly not tired at all. He sat down at his desk and leaned forward in his swivel chair.

"Shoot," he said.

"This is confidential." Moravia looked at him with nervous brown eyes. "You swear to it?"

"If that's the way you want it," Schaefer said, feeling a little silly. "What is it? Something about the Pollux stuff—they haven't gotten back yet, have they?"

"Not yet." Moravia shook his head. The light gleamed on his black hair. "The diplomatic mission won't return for another three years."

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Schaefer fumbled for his pipe, stuck a cube of tobacco in it, and inhaled until he could taste the smoke. There was a taut emptiness in the pit of his stomach.

"You've got a new one."

Moravia didn't answer him directly. He reached behind him, to a table Schaefer kept in the office for students who had to take special exams, and picked up a heavy briefcase. He unlocked it, took some glossy three-dimensional photographs out of it. He handed them to Schaefer without a word.

Schaefer looked at the top one and swallowed hard.

Words weren't necessary.

There were no words.

A riot of color: green from chlorophyll, yellow and orange and violet from flowers, red-brown from the soil, blue from the sky.

Faces: a man's, a woman's, a boy's. Hesitant smiles, shyness, uncertainty. Darkish skins, wide eyes, tiny noses. Gray hair—no, it was fur, with white stripes in it. Canine teeth that gleamed in the light when mouths were opened.

Schaefer looked more closely. Diastema? He couldn't tell.

Bodies: very light, small-boned, with extremely long, graceful arms. The arms were longer than the legs.

"They're brachiators," Schaefer breathed.

Moravia nodded. "Yes, they often swing through the trees."

More pictures: caves, tents, thatched villages, adobe towns. Small fields planted with crops that looked like cereals. Some animals in corrals, ungainly mammals that were obviously milk-producers.

"Where is it?"

"Aldebaran. The fourth planet. One of the survey ships found it six years ago—the ship's been back five months now."

"Got a culture map?"

"Right here." Moravia slipped a sheet out of his case.

Schaefer studied it carefully. There were four large continental land masses and several big islands. The survey had been thorough on cultural distributions, although it was necessarily superficial in a trait-list sort of way. Most of the people clearly lived by hunting and gathering. There were three centers of agriculture; one continent seemed to lack it altogether.

There were no cities, although there were a number of large adobe towns in several areas. He checked the key with a sinking sensation. No writing. And no real working of metals, except for some raw copper.

He put down his pipe. "Damn," he said.

"Exactly," agreed Moravia. "We're stuck."

Schaefer got up and paced the floor. It was maddening. It was like glimpsing the promised land and then having the gate slammed in your face.

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"No mistake, I suppose?"

"None."

Schaefer sat down again, clamped his pipe in his teeth. It had been rough enough when Pollux had been found, twelve years ago. That had been the first one, the first system with humanoid beings, the first positive evidence that man was not alone in the universe.

The end of a centuries-long search.

The fifth world of Pollux, 29 light-years from Earth, had a civilization, as defined by law: urban centers, writing, advanced technology. They even had spaceships, although they had not yet perfected an interstellar drive.

Schaefer still remembered the excitement, the promise, the thrill of that discovery. He had prayed that he might be selected to go along with the diplomatic mission as part of the scientific project. He had been passed over. He told himself that he couldn't have gone anyway, couldn't have left the kids to grow up by themselves while he spent the implacable years it took to reach another star system and return—

He shut off the thought.

The kids were gone now.

It didn't matter anyway. Pollux V had had a civilization roughly comparable to Earth's, which made it simple under the law. Earth could contact them again, talk to them, trade with them.

Aldebaran's fourth planet was a different kettle of fish.

Schaefer knew the law, and approved of it. There had been enough powers in the UN that remembered their own status as one-time colonies so that the law was a foregone conclusion.

Earthman's Burden?

Hunt the natives down if they look a little different?

Round them up and herd them into reservations?

No, thanks!

The law was explicit. If a planet was found with humanoid beings who were not prepared to defend themselves technologically or legally, there was just one policy: *Hands Off.*

No trade, no exploitation, no scientific missions.

No blather about progress and underdeveloped areas.

No well-intentioned slaughter.

It was the great triumph of mercy in law: *Let 'em alone!*

Schaefer understood that law, and believed in it. He knew the whole sordid story, concealed for so long: Tasmanians hunted like animals until they were extinct, Africans crammed into stinking ships and sold as slaves, Polynesians ravaged by disease. American Indians shot for game and tortured by Spanish explorers and then virtually exterminated simply because they were in the way.

It was a good law, the best law.

He handed the photographs back.

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"Too bad," he said. "But there are more important things than science."

Moravia looked at the floor. "Yes. I knew you'd see that. That's why I came to you."

Schaefer waited, his palms beginning to sweat.

Moravia glanced around the office, his quick eyes taking in the good oil painting on the wall, the novels stuck in between the monographs and tapes and journals on the shelves.

"You see the problem," he said slowly. "At least, you see part of it. We cannot go back to the Aldebaran system. It would be ethically and legally wrong." He smiled faintly. "And we'd both lose our jobs if anyone ever found out."

Schaefer stared at the man. "You're not suggesting—"

Moravia ignored him. "We can't go back. We dare not risk making an exception that might be the beginning of the end for millions of free people out there. It's unthinkable."

Schaefer waited, feeling as though he had one foot waving over a chasm, with the other about to follow.

Moravia slammed his fist down on the table with a suddenness that made them both jump.

"We've got to go back! Heaven help me, we've *got* to."

The chasm yawned below Schaefer, black and waiting.

"Let's have it," he said.

Moravia took a deep breath. "Those people out there are in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

Moravia met his eyes squarely. They were haunted eyes, tired eyes. "They're dying," he said.

Schaefer digested that one, slowly.

"All of them?"

"No. Just one area. Only a few hundred thousand people." There was just a trace of irony in Moravia's voice.

Schaefer drew on his pipe. He knew the score now. He wished desperately that Moravia had never walked into his office or his life.

"We could help them, is that it?"

"Looking at it simply as a problem to be solved, yes. We could save many of them, to say nothing of generations to come. There are people out there dying. We know the answer. Legally, we can't deliver it."

"And morally?"

"You tell me, Dr. Schaefer."

The two men sat in the office, staring at each other.

II

It was early evening when Schaefer lifted his copter from the roof of his university office. There was a fat yellow moon in the sky, dimming the brilliance of the stars. He jockeyed into the fast traffic lane, a river of blinking lights that swirled in the soft night air.

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Below him there was another river, a winding ribbon of silver in the moon's rays. The river glided through darkness now; he could not see the green beds of the treetops or the wind-waves of the grassland meadows. But he could smell the freshness of it, the life of clear water and the peace of trees, and he was glad it was there.

Houses floated above him, warm splashes of light like fireflies in the dusk, and he thought, *Antigravity did much more than just give us the key to space—it gave us back our Earth.*

He remembered when he was a boy, walking in the green wonderland of the forest, building rock dams across chuckling little streams, and he was grateful for those memories. He was glad that people no longer dirtied the land with their cities, and thankful that men had headed off the pollution of the Earth while there was yet time.

It had been close, too close.

It was so easy to turn grasslands to dust, forests to eroding mudflats, flowers to steel, rivers to sewers.

He looked up at the faint stars, almost hidden by copter-bugs and houses. *God, I wouldn't know Aldebaran if I were looking right at it.*

Schaefer had never been in space, not even to the moon.

He knew, though, that Aldebaran was 53 light-years away. That was a far piece, in any league. Even with the interstellar drive, it would take a minimum of ten years, five years to get there, five to return. And it wouldn't be that simple.

He was no spaceman, his roots were in the Earth. His roots and his friends and his job. Ten or fifteen years was a big chunk out of a man's life. To be sure, *he* wouldn't age that much, not in the icebox, but everything on Earth would. Jim, Norm, Betty—they all would be past 60 before he returned. And in his own field he would be fifteen years behind. Fifteen years of journals . . .

And there was Lee.

He couldn't go without her.

What of her life? Would she be willing to go? Could she take it? He didn't attempt to kid himself about his wife. She was not so strong as she had been before they had lost their children. She had been an alcoholic for two years before they snapped her out of it.

He listened to the buzz of the copter in the night.

People are the problem. They always are.

He thought of Moravia's haunted eyes, and wondered.

His home loomed up below him, an island of green in a sea of twinkling lights.

Schaefer landed.

They sat on the couch together. The coffee was still hot in the

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heat-retaining cups on the imitation redwood table, but it was stale and bitter. Even the fresh night breeze could not completely clear away the film of smoke from the room, and the ashtrays were filled with his charred pipe-cubes and her lipstick-stained cigarette butts.

He was not tired. He was in that flat state of being wide awake, but knowing he had to get up in the morning for an early class. It was probably worse thinking about it now than it would be then.

It was three o'clock in the morning.

Lee had dark circles under her eyes, and there was a coffee stain on the blue silk of her robe. Her hair—a soft brown that she referred to as a nothing color—tumbled down around her almost-thin shoulders.

Moravia's photographs, maps, and charts were scattered on the floor.

"It's up to you, Ev. You know that."

He shook his head. "It's up to both of us. Always has been. I fouled us up once; that's enough."

"Maybe." *Two youngsters playing by the stream. Danny with his dark, serious eyes. Sue, all laughter and sunshine. They'd wandered off; he hadn't seen them. He'd been too busy with that fat old trout he'd snagged once, and missed. He had never even heard the screams when the kids had gone out too far in the swift water. He had never known, until the man had come to him with the two limp shapes in his arms. . . .*

"I don't know what to do," he said. "He says he can fix it up, get me a leave, cover my tracks. But fifteen years is a long time, Lee. There'll be questions. I won't ever be able to tell anyone where I was. I'll get no thanks for what I do. I could very easily lose my job. Maybe these are selfish considerations, but what the hell. I'm no knight in shining armor."

She laughed, a friendly laugh. "Nobody ever accused us of being heroes," she admitted.

"There's more than that. I don't know what the *right* thing to do is. It's easy for some people—they always seem to know what's right and what's wrong. It's never been easy for me. I believe in that law. I want no part of colonies that take a world away from its own people. I want no part of that ignorant arrogance that assumes that our ways are right and all other ways wrong. If we go out there, if we set the precedent for whatever reason, then what happens the next time, and the next?"

"Careful," she said, touching him. "The knight is showing through the armor."

He flushed. "Damn it all. How about our friends? What would they think of us?"

Lee didn't answer. There was a silence, and then she said, "Ev, are you still worried about me?"

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The question took him by surprise. "I don't know," he said honestly. "Should I be?"

"I won't let you down again."

"You never let me down, Lee."

She leaned over and picked up a picture from the floor. They had both looked at it many times. It was a photograph of a child. Not a human child, perhaps, but they never thought of that.

A big-eyed, skinny kid—skinny except where his belly was bloated with hunger.

A shy smile, not asking for anything, not even hoping.

Just a hungry kid.

"Moravia knew what that picture would do to us," he said, not without bitterness.

"We have to go," Lee said. "There isn't really any choice, not for us."

He said nothing, his chin in his hands.

Lee got up with a whisper of warm silk. "Come on, honey. It'll be a long day tomorrow."

He got up, his mind blank, and followed his wife into their bedroom.

The lights went out, and their home was dark, with only the warning beacons burning beneath the stars.

The semester was almost over, and Schaefer was busy with his preparations for final exams. Writing them was no trouble by now, but all the secondary side-effects took time. There were students who had missed lectures, and wanted to be filled in on a week's work in fifteen minutes. There were students who were failing, and wanted to pass. (*"I'll do anything, Dr. Schaefer, anything! If I don't make a good grade, I'll be disinherited!"*) There were students who absolutely *had* to be on the moon the day of the final, and couldn't they *please* take their exam with some other section?

It was funny, in a way, but life went on. His head was spinning with unanswered questions and problems he could not discuss, but he still had a job to do.

He hadn't seen Moravia for almost a month.

And then, one afternoon, there he was, waiting in his office. He had another man with him—a small, wiry man, his dark hair shot with gray.

"Ah, Dr. Schaefer!" the little man said, cutting off Moravia's attempted introduction. "I am Tino Sandoval, your partner in crime." He smiled, showing very white, even teeth.

Schaefer shook his hand with genuine pleasure. "I've read your book, sir." He nodded toward a shelf and a title. *Spring Lake.*

"Excellent! Did you read it before or after you found out that you were going to have to work with me?"

"I read it years ago. It was wonderful."

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Sandoval was flattered and embarrassed, and covered it with a flood of words. "It was a little thing. The critics in your country, they say I am a new Thoreau. He was from New England, I am a Mexican." He spread his hands in a thoroughly Latin gesture. "How can that be?"

Schaefer laughed, feeling more hopeful than he had felt in a long time. He knew that Sandoval was a top-notch ecologist, and he knew already that they would get along. That helped a lot.

"You two will have plenty of time to talk later," Moravia suggested, smiling. "Should we get down to business?"

"He has taken on your ways," Sandoval whispered loudly. "Always in a hurry! He wants to be an American."

Moravia lit a cigarette. If he resented Sandoval's remark, he gave no sign. "We're all set and the ship is ready," he said. "I can tell you that it wasn't easy."

He paused, searching for words. "We talk a lot about spiritual values, about high purposes. Did you ever try to raise money, a lot of money, for a mercy mission —in secret, when the contributors can't even get a button for their money? When they know, absolutely, that it will never benefit them in the slightest? When they know they are even breaking the law?"

He looked haggard, Schaefer thought. And his eyes were more haunted, more troubled, than ever.

"A lot of people had to know. The Security Council had to know. The governments of many countries had to know—unofficially, of course. You can't build a spaceship and launch it in your backyard. Too many people know, and it can't be helped. If anything goes wrong, if the word ever leaks, governments will fall. It is terrible how a thing like this can snowball."

"In other words," Schaefer said, "we've got a bull by the horns."

"Exactly. If you get into trouble, we can't help you. If you are successful, we can't even thank you in public."

"It does not make for high morale," Sandoval said. His voice was suddenly shrewd, stabbing. "Who is going with us?"

"You will have twenty UN men under your direction. They're intelligent and well-trained."

"Good. And the ship? Who will command the ship?"

Moravia seemed to hesitate, then spoke swiftly. "Admiral Hurley will have thirty officers and men under him."

Tino Sandoval stuck a cigarette in a holder, lit it, inhaled deeply. "And this Hurley? You have every confidence in him?"

This time Moravia did hesitate. "He's the best we could do," he said finally. "He knows his business."

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"By business, you mean running a spaceship?"

"Yes."

Schaefer watched the two men fence with each other. He had been bothered by the same questions, but he was content to let Sandoval carry the ball.

"You have of course fed the situation and the personality components into a computer?"

"Certainly."

"And the prognosis is that it will all work out OK, probably?"

Moravia hesitated again. "Probably," he said. "Look here, Sandy! I'm in this thing as deep as you are—deeper, in fact."

"You're not going," Sandoval pointed out bluntly. "We are. I mean no offense. If we can't trust you, who can we trust?"

The question hung in the air. There was no answer to it.

Schaefer felt uncomfortable and tried to change the subject. He looked at Sandoval. "Is your wife going too?"

The little man laughed and jabbed his cigarette holder at the air. "My wife? That is a good one, Evan!"

"I'm sorry. I assumed you were married—"

"Oh, do not be sorry, please! Is a man sorry because he has no chain around his neck?" His eyes twinkled. "There are many fish in the sea, Evan."

Moravia watched the two men with a curious expression in his eyes. Schaefer caught it, and wondered at it. Pride? Hope? Regret?

Evidently Sandoval also felt that it was time to let Moravia off the hook, for he steered the conversation into a new channel.

"My people, they were Indians not long ago," he said. "You are an anthropologist, Evan. Maybe you would like to study me?"

"I might learn something at that."

Sandoval laughed, and the room was free of tension.

"How long do we have, Ben?" Schaefer asked Moravia.

Moravia looked at him with dark, clouded eyes. "Three weeks," he said.

The three men fell silent.

Schaefer thought of a child's face, a child's hungry body.

That child would be dead by now, his solemn eyes forever closed.

But there were other children.

How many would die in three weeks?

How many would die in five years?

"Come on," he said. "There's lots to do."

III

The ship had a number, not a name.

It lifted away from the Earth on a column of silence, and yet the silence was filled with the tautness of power almost beyond compre-

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hension. It lifted through rain and white clouds and blue skies, and then it was in the star-bright stillness where the winds never blew.

It passed the metallic doughnut of the old space station, useless now with antigrav takeoffs.

And then the heavily shielded atomics cut in with a hushed Niagara of sun-flame, and the journey had begun.

Schaefer and Lee and Sandoval sat in Sandy's room, which was hardly more than a big closet, and felt the immensity that surrounded them. It was the same feeling you had when you climbed to the top of a mountain and looked over the edge, down and down and down, but there was nothing to see.

There are no windows on spaceships.

They gradually relaxed, as the vibration of the atomics steadied and soothed. They looked at each other and spoke in low voices and thought about the icebox.

When they were four ship-days out, they knew it was time.

Admiral Hurley sent for them, as was the custom.

Until that moment, they had never met the man.

Hurley's cabin was not large, but it seemed spacious after their own. It was neat and clean and a trifle barren. There were pictures on the walls, all of ships: sailing craft leaning into the wind and spray, sharklike submarines surfacing into the sunlight, a shaft of steel against a lunar background, the squat mother-ship that had been the first to send her children for the touch-down on Mars.

The admiral was in full uniform. He was a tall, thin man, with a balding head that was pinkish in the light. His face was all sharp lines and crags; there was no softness in it. His eyes were an icy green, as though they concealed a bitterness he had long ago learned to live with.

He was neither friendly nor unfriendly. He was scrupulously polite, holding a chair for Lee, and he gave an impression of a man who would do his duty although the world collapsed around him.

Hurley waited until they were all seated and uncomfortable, and then he spoke. Even talking to them, he kept his distance. He addressed them as a group, not as individuals.

"We're about to switch over to the inertialess drive. It is our custom on shipboard to drink a toast before any passenger goes into the icebox for the first time. It helps to keep you warm, over the years."

He smiled a wintry smile, and they all laughed politely. Schaefer was certain that the man had made the same little joke every single time he had gone through this ceremony. Still, he could not dislike the admiral. They were different kinds of people, and that was all.

Hurley produced a bottle of

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sherry and four surprisingly fragile glasses. He poured the drinks, raised his in a toast: "To a successful mission."

They sipped. Sherry is not the most powerful drink in the world, but it warmed things up a trifle.

"You understand, of course, about the icebox. There is nothing to fear. We have never had an accident. You will all be injected with shots—a substance derived from the lymphoid tissue of hibernating animals, an absorbent of vitamin D, insulin, some simple drugs. Then your body temperature will be chilled. All your bodily processes will be suspended, and you will actually age only a week or so in the five years it will take us to reach our destination."

He poured more sherry. None of this was news to Schaefer, but since Hurley was enjoying his role of giving the scientists some elementary facts he did not interrupt.

"Naturally," Hurley went on, "there will be men on duty at all times. I myself can be at my post within an hour if need be; that is part of our training. We work in relays of several months each. Since you are civilians, you will not be called until we reach the Aldebaran system."

When he used the word *civilians* his voice was carefully neutral.

"We know we're in good hands, Admiral," Lee said, giving him her best smile. "We wish we could be of more help to you. We know this trip is not entirely to your liking."

Hurley thawed slightly, but did not reply.

Schaefer thought: *Ten years and more on a mission that must seem to him a mush-mouthed waste of time. Ten years to help some people he doesn't even think of as human. Ten years while others are out on the great adventure. Ten years with fuddy-duddy social scientists. No, Hurley doesn't relish this assignment—and who can blame him?*

"How many women are on this ship, Admiral?" Lee asked. "Some of the men seem a bit hungry, even when they look at an old crone like me."

Hurley took the bait, pouring some more sherry. "You're a most attractive woman, Mrs. Schaefer, if I may say so. I trust none of my men have—"

Lee blushed, synthetically. "Oh, no. They are perfect gentlemen. I'm just curious." She used her smile again.

"All the officers have their wives along," he said brusquely. "Privileges of rank, you know." He chuckled, and Schaefer decided that the admiral was probably a pretty good guy—in the Officers' Club, with other admirals.

"Isn't that—well, unstable?" asked Sandoval.

Hurley looked at him, and some of the ice came back. "There is only so much room on a space-

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ship, sir. And your party, with all the UN men, is taking up a good bit of it. The other men on this cruise were selected in part because they were unmarried. We had no choice."

Sandoval nodded, frowning.

"It isn't as bad as it seems, Mr. Sandoval. We're frozen most of the time, if I may remind you. On shipboard, the wives go along mainly so that there will be no age discrepancy when we return. There is no real problem—unless we have to stay in the Aldebaran system over a protracted period of time. On that matter, of course, I am under your orders."

Schaefer grinned. "You tossed that one right back in our laps, sir."

"That's the way it is."

Hurley stood up, indicating that the meeting was adjourned.

Schaefer was curious about why the time-deceleration effect did not apply on shipboard, since they were moving faster than the speed of light. He had read an explanation somewhere, and knew that it had something to do with the nature of the drive, but was ashamed to ask about it. The admiral had little enough respect for him now, and if he didn't even know about *that* . . .

Lee's skin glowed with the sherry. "Sweet dreams," she said to Hurley as they left.

His door closed behind them.

Schaefer and Sandoval kept Lee between them as they walked. It was almost as though they were huddled together for warmth, and despite the fact that there was no change in the temperature inside the spaceship a cold wind seemed to blow through the sterile white corridors. . . .

"There is nothing to fear."

Whenever a man told him that, Schaefer knew that it was time to get worried.

They took them separately, to avoid scenes.

When a man saw his wife seem to die before his eyes, when her breathing slowed until he couldn't see it, when the frost began to form on the tips of her hair—

It was better not to watch.

Sandoval went first, smoking a last cigarette in his jaunty holder.

Then Lee. She smiled at him, and he was acutely aware that he still loved his wife after twenty years of marriage. She still caught at his heart, still made him want to reach out and touch her just to be sure she was there. It wasn't just the hair or the eyes or the body. It was the warm certainty that she would understand, and her faith that he too could always accept her for what she was.

In a universe of miracles, that was the best one.

Then it was his turn.

They took him through an airlock into a small cold room. There was a white slab in it, more like an

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operating table than anything else. He took off his clothes and stretched out on it. His back tensed for the chill, but the table surface was warmed.

The doctor gave him his best bedside smile, checked his medical history a final time.

"See you in five years," the doctor said.

He used the needle, a big one. It stung, but not much.

Schaefer felt nothing at first, but when the medics lifted him onto a stretcher he found he had no sensation in his body. He tried to wiggle his fingers. Nothing happened.

The other lock opened.

The medics zipped up their suits and carried him through.

They were in the icebox. It must have been cold, for vapor clouds came out of the suits. His naked body did not feel it. He couldn't turn his head, but he saw enough. He saw more than he wanted to see.

Catacombs.

Glistening walls lined with cubicles. Forms in them, stiff and still. He could not see their faces, the faces were covered with masks and tubes.

They lifted him into his slot, and he felt nothing. He saw them insert two thin flexible tubes into his nostrils.

Then the mask.

He could not see.

This is the way death is. I cannot see or hear or smell. I cannot feel. There is no panic, no fear, no cold. There is nothing. I do not exist.

His mind began to blur. He could no longer think coherently, and then, from somewhere deep down inside of him, he found a new respect for the admiral, and for all men who sailed this strangest of all strange seas. . . .

That was all.

He ceased to be.

At first, it was no worse than waking up after a long nap on a hot, sticky afternoon. He hovered between sleep and awareness and dreamed rapid and pointless dreams. A part of him knew that he had been asleep and that he would be awake soon.

It was all rather pleasant and drowsy.

It stayed that way for what seemed to be a long time.

Funny. So hard to wake up. Tired? Hangover? Sick?

Sick! No, worse than sick. What . . .

Ice. White. Cold.

Vaults, slabs, bodies.

I'm dead, it's over, don't let me wake up underground, in a box, with wet earth all around me, with my body—

He was out of it.

He opened his eyes. There was the doctor's face, smiling. He moved his head. He was on the white table under the white light.

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The table was warm under him, but the room was cold, and he was cold.

"Easy now, Dr. Schaefer," the doctor said. "It's always hard the first time, but you're perfectly all right."

He tried to move, couldn't.

His lips shaped a word. "Lee?" His voice was the voice of a stranger.

"Your wife is fine, just fine. She's waiting for you in your cabin. You'll be carried there on a stretcher. We'll have some hot broth waiting. A special diet for a day or two and you'll be your old self again."

My old self, but I know what death is now. I'll remember. I'll always remember.

Then he was in his cabin, in the bed, with Lee next to him. They could hardly talk, but the hot broth helped.

It was two days before he felt human again.

Then there were notes to go over with Sandy, notes and plans and charts.

When they were getting close, an officer appeared. "The admiral's compliments, sir. Aldebaran is visible in the control room viewer, if you would like to have a look at it."

They were escorted to the control room, a spotless oval chamber filled with computers. One entire wall was lined with dials, their surfaces red and green and yellow. A black bank of switches had four men on duty before it, seated in contour chairs, earphone bands across their heads.

Schaefer felt like an intruder, but he was fascinated.

Admiral Hurley stepped forward with a smile. "Have a good sleep?"

"I must have set the wrong dial," Sandoval said. "I think I overslept."

Hurley chuckled, very much at home here in his control room.

Schaefer thought, *On Earth, five years have passed. All my students will have gone, all my friends will be older.*

The admiral took Lee's arm and guided her to a panel as tall as she was. He nodded at a technician, and the slide rolled back.

They were looking out.

They saw beauty beyond belief, and loneliness that was almost painful to see.

A giant red sun blazed against a backdrop of night, with distant stars like diamonds around it. Streamers and fountains of brilliant gases erupted in flaring bursts. Scarlet prominences streaked the edges like the clouds of nightmare.

Distance was a word without a meaning. There was vastness everywhere, an endless depth that clutched at your stomach. Even that sun, 72 times the size of the sun Earth knew, was a brave candle burning in a cave of Stygian gloom.

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"It's best not to look too long," Hurley said.

The panel closed.

They were back in the control room, back in familiar dimensions that a mind could grasp and understand.

"I thought you ought to see it," Hurley said.

"Thank you," Schaefer whispered. "It was worth the trip."

"We land in two days," the admiral said.

They were escorted back to their rooms.

There were few sensations in the hours that followed, but they could tell when the ship's power system switched over to antigravity. They waited the long wait.

In his mind's eye, Schaefer saw a planet, a blue world floating in space. He saw it grow larger, a balloon inflating. He saw continents and seas take form, and then trees and rivers and snow-kissed mountains.

He saw a strange, slim people, with long arms and eyes that watched and wondered—

A bell rang.

"We've landed," Sandoval said.

IV

A world is many worlds, and many peoples. A world is flame and ice, lush tropical jungles and brown desert sands, laughter and hate and boredom.

Their mission concerned just one part of one continent. They had no authority to visit the rest, no matter what fascinating things might be waiting there. But even one part of one continent was a large chunk of real estate; a man couldn't trot over it the way he could spring the length of a football field.

It was going to take time, and lots of it. Time to check on the inevitable changes that five years had brought. Time to find out the key facts the first expedition had not been authorized to investigate. Time to work out a solution to the problem faced by these people, and time to put that solution into effect.

Time, and more time.

The first contact ship had made some recordings of the local languages and dialects, and had mapped them. That was an enormous help, but it did not give conversational fluency, which was imperative.

There were no interpreters on Aldebaran IV.

And there could be no mistakes.

It would be pleasant, Schaefer thought, if it could have been done the flashy tri-di Space Patrol way. No pain, no trouble. You landed on Mudball VII, which looked just like Earth except that it had jagged mountains that it never could have had with an atmosphere. You stepped out in your razor-sharp uniform, mowed down a horde of slithering reptiles

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with your blaster, rescued a lovely but chaste female, and whipped up a jim-dandy whiz-bang invention on the spur of the moment. Then, as the enemy fled in consternation, you smiled your enigmatic smile and faded into stars and a word from your sponsor.

The actual plan was somewhat different.

The crew was to stay aboard the ship. Schaefer and Sandoval were to take copters and make extended studies of their special aspects of the problem. The UN men were to fan out with cameras and other recording devices and check for specific items of information.

It was going to take plenty of sweat, among other things.

Lee, of course, had to stay in the ship, at least at first. The whole business was tricky, and it was senseless to multiply the risks they would have to take.

When the time came, Schaefer adjusted his oxygen mask and went through the airlock to the waiting copter. The heat hit him like a fist when he stepped outside. A glare of sunlight almost blinded him until he got used to it, and swirls of gritty brown dust pulled at his clothes.

He stood blinking for a moment, watching Sandoval as the ecologist grinned at the dust with anticipation. He felt his boots sink into the shifting stuff, but not far; it was solid as a rock slab underneath.

He thought: *This is the step of no return. This is the step into a new world, the step that Cortés and Pizarro and all the others took. This is the step that breaks the law, breaks the precedent. Who will follow in these footsteps, if word ever leaks out? Who will swarm on these people, with honeyed words and grabbing hands?*

"Come on, Mac," a man yelled. "This crate's blowing away."

Schaefer waved, swung up into the cabin. He settled himself and nodded at the man. The man let go, and Schaefer lifted the copter into the sky, up past the shining obelisk of the great ship.

He headed west, keeping low enough to spot details beneath him. From here, the land was a vast baked mud-flat, checkered with dark crack-lines. Dirty brown dust-eddies played over the surface, and the mighty red sun beat down on it all like a malevolent furnace.

At first, there was no sign of life.

Within twenty minutes, however, he passed over what had once been a town. Broken adobe walls were drifted high with sand, and the square ruins of houses had black gaping holes for windows. The place was utterly lifeless now, just as the once-alive land around it was dead.

Once, he knew, all this had been green farmland, with trees and streams and fields of grain.

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Now, it was nothing.

He flew on, an excitement growing within him.

Death was everywhere, but ahead of him, beyond the horizon, the living village waited.

He came to the fields first, and they were nothing to write home about. They were irregular plots of burned-over land that had never known a plow, but there were crops growing in them, including something that looked a good deal like maize. The plants did not seem to be doing well, and it wasn't hard to figure out why: water.

There was an irrigation system of sorts, small trenches fed by what should have been a good-sized river. The river terraces were clearly visible from the air, and it was obvious that the river was drying up. Schaefer doubted that it was a quarter of its former size, and the irrigation trenches weren't drawing that much water out of it by a long shot.

He saw people, too, poking pointed sticks. They looked up at him as he passed, and from his altitude they didn't look alien at all. He had the curious feeling that this was not another world, not a planet of another sun, but only the past of Earth; he felt that he had somehow gone back in time, to see his own ancestors fighting the hard fight with wind and sun and the long, long dry spells.

Then the village was below him.

It was a town, really, rather than a village. It was walled, just as the abandoned place had been, and it was basically a cluster of square adobe houses and dark crooked streets built around a central market plaza. Schaefer went down low, and he could see stout poles projecting from the sides of the houses over the streets. The slim, long-armed people were swinging through the hot air, hand over hand, from one pole to another. Apparently, they never walked if they could avoid it.

The town, even to his eyes, was not an attractive place.

It already had something of the decay of a ruin about it, but it was not clean as a ruin is clean, washed by patient rains and bleaching sunshine. There was garbage in the streets. *No wonder they travel on the walls above the streets. I'd do the same, if I could.* It was the sort of place that looked as if it was crawling with disease, and his skin prickled when he thought of it.

But then he saw the market below him as he hovered. It was a gay riot of color, and most of it was shaded by awnings. He looked down at what seemed to be a sea of faces, a million eyes all staring up at him.

He took a deep breath through his face mask.

"Ready or not, here I come," he muttered.

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He hoped the information from the survey ship was correct.

If not—

Well, he probably wouldn't live long enough to realize that he'd made a mistake. There was no turning back now. He aimed his copter for a cleared space in the square, hovering until he was certain there was no one directly under him, and landed.

The copter blades shivered to a halt.

He climbed out, his empty hands in plain view.

In an instant, he was surrounded.

He stood there in the heat by his copter, and he was two people. One man faced the crowd with level eyes and a determined smile. The other stood back and watched, and felt a vague relief. Schaefer had never been a man of action, and he had often wondered how he would face up to a really dangerous situation.

He was unarmed, and he could have been quite literally torn apart if things went wrong. He was scared, deep down inside, but he could handle it.

It was a good thing to know about yourself.

He looked at them and they looked at him. They didn't press him too closely, and seemed more friendly than otherwise. He was the tallest man there, but hardly the most powerful. The people's arms were very long; their finger tips reached their ankles when they stood erect. The arms were slender and graceful, but they were strongly muscled.

He barely noticed the arms, however. It was the *feel* of the crowd that impressed him. They were a people of surprising dignity, even in a situation that was unfamiliar to them. Dignity—and courage too, he supposed, for they were probably as afraid of him as he was of them.

The people watched him with polite curiosity. They were very small-boned, and their tiny noses and wide dark eyes gave their faces an almost frail appearance. They were dressed in bright-colored tunics that left their arms completely free.

None of the men carried weapons. These were farmers and merchants, not soldiers. The rather elfin children were not at all shy, but they were well-behaved.

The girls, Schaefer had to admit, were a surprise. Despite their strangeness, they had an elusive grace and vitality, with warm and gentle eyes. Their long supple arms and white canine teeth were just different enough to be really interesting. In fact, he decided, the girls were as genuinely sexy as any he had ever seen.

That could mean trouble, here as well as anywhere.

It had its compensations, however.

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The people were very patient, most of them standing in the shade of awnings that covered the market tables and booths. They waited for him to make the first move. Schaefer, standing in the hot sun by his copter, was only too glad to oblige.

He raised his left hand, the four fingers extended, the thumb folded into his palm.

There was a murmur from the people, and they moved back respectfully. Schaefer wanted to talk to them, but he knew it wasn't a good idea for several reasons. For one thing, his command of the language was too shaky. For another, he didn't know these people well enough to be sure he was saying the proper thing, even if he managed the grammar adequately.

So he waited, and they waited.

He could not *see* the suffering as he studied them. Most of the people did not look thin, and they did not appear to be starving. It was not a dramatic moment where hordes of famine-ridden men and women gazed up at their rescuer with adoration in their eyes. They didn't know why he had come, and they didn't even need his help visibly.

He knew they were dying, nonetheless. A whole town had once lived on that sun-baked plain he had seen, and now lived no more. The people before him were undoubtedly fewer than they had been the year before, and would be fewer still next year. It was a subtle question of the carrying capacity of ruined land, and when the population pressure got too great for the food supply people died. It was all simple and timeless and horrible. He knew the facts in a way they could never know them—facts gathered by experts on the survey team. Within fifty years, this entire portion of the continent would be dead—and there was no way out. These farmers were surrounded by tough hunting peoples that would never give up their territories.

So a few hundred thousand natives on a forbidden planet light-years from Earth were faced with extinction. No doubt it happened all the time, on worlds Earth did not know and never would know.

There were many men who could learn of such a tragedy and shrug. *So what? Did they ever do anything for us? We've nothing against those savages, but it's their problem, not ours.*

Schaefer looked at the people before him. He knew that he was not such a man, and he was glad of it.

There was a stir at the edges of the crowd, a buzz of voices.

Schaefer turned and made the sign again.

The priests were coming.

The religious officials wore long blue robes, although their arms

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were free. It was rather odd to see them come swinging along the wall-poles, hand over hand, their skirts swirling in the air. They did it with a solemn gravity that should have been ludicrous, but wasn't.

Once in the market square, they walked straight up to Schaefer and confronted him in a group. Schaefer made the sign, and it was returned.

The priest who seemed to be the leader said something that was too fast for Schaefer. Schaefer smiled carefully and said one of the sentences he had learned: "I come as your friend, and I wish to be taken to your temple."

The priest nodded impassively. He was a striking figure of a man, and the white-striped fur on his head gave him a certain man-of-distinction air. He was obviously no fool; when he saw that Schaefer did not handle the language well, he made no further attempt to speak. Again, Schaefer was amazed at the courtesy of these people. He was positive that the priest would do almost anything to avoid causing his guest embarrassment.

Beckoning to him, the priest turned and led the way out of the market. Schaefer fell in behind him without hesitation, knowing that his copter was safe where it was. The other priests kept him pretty well surrounded, but it was more of an escort than a guard.

He had a bad moment when the leader started to swing up to the wall projections above the street, but the priest looked at Schaefer's arms and changed his mind. He stuck to the ground, which was quite a concession considering the debris that littered the space between the adobe house walls.

Schaefer knew that they were wondering about him—a man who, by their standards, was an absolute freak. A man who had come out of the sky. A man who knew their sacred sign and a few words of their dialect. A man who resembled those beings seen several seasons ago, about whom so many stories had been whispered. . . .

Well, the important thing was to make contact with the men at the top. Schaefer was too well trained to start with the common people, whether he liked them or not. Once you got fouled up with factions, once you were an object of suspicion to the big boys, you never got anywhere in an alien culture. The fact was that humanoid beings, despite their individual differences, always followed certain laws. One such principle was that in an agricultural town of this type the secular and religious authorities were apt to be the same, in other words, it was likely to be a theocracy. This being the case, a man either got along with the priests, or he got out.

They led him into a house that was little different from the others they had passed, but inside there was a deep stairway lighted by

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smooth-burning torches. The temple, of course, was underground. Had this not been the case, he would certainly have spotted a pyramid-like structure from the air.

He followed the priests into a long, winding passage. The light was bad, and there was little to see. Eventually they came into a large chamber in which hundreds of oil-burning lamps were burning. The walls were hung with tapestries. In a depression at one end of the chamber there was a black altar. Spaced around the walls, rather like pictures placed over cloth, were little rings of black skins. Each skin was only a few inches across, but there were lots of them.

Schaefer was glad to see them. They meant that Sandy was right.

There was no ceremony. That was for show, for the people. It would come later, if it was needed. For the present, the priests wanted information, and they went about it in a no-nonsense manner.

Schaefer was escorted into the presence of a man who apparently was the priest-king, although there was no exact translation of his title in English. He sat on a couch in a small, austere room. He was a small man, even for his people, but he absolutely dominated the situation with the force of his personality. He fixed his dark alert eyes on Schaefer's face and Schaefer was startled by the familiarity of those eyes.

They were Moravia's eyes.

They were haunted eyes.

There was a whispered conversation between the priest-king and the man who had led Schaefer's escort. Then Schaefer was left alone with the ruler of the people.

There was a long silence.

Schaefer had an uneasy feeling that he was in the presence of a powerful man, who commanded strange gods. But when the man spoke his voice was calm and courteous.

"I am Marin," he said slowly. "I wait for your words."

Schaefer swallowed and made the speech he had learned. "I am called Schaefer. I have come to help you if you desire help. I come in friendship and without weapons. It is known that your lands shrink, your crops fail, your people die. Your tongue is new to me, and I must learn more of it. Then we will talk. It is my prayer that there will always be friendship between your people and my people."

Marin fixed his eyes again on Schaefer's face, and Schaefer was glad that he had been speaking the simple truth, neither more nor less. Marin was not a man to be trifled with.

Marin got to his feet, placed his left hand on Schaefer's right shoulder. His face was shadowed in the lamplight. His grip was strong. "Let it be so, Schaefer. Your prayer is good. Soon we will talk again.

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Until then, live in peace among us."

Marin himself led him out and introduced him to an old priest named Loquav, who was to be his teacher.

After that, Schaefer settled down for months of hard work.

He had a lot to learn before he spoke with Marin again.

A worry he could not identify nagged him as he worked. He sensed an urgency that drove him far into the night, studying by a flickering torch.

He saw eyes when he slept.

Moravia's.

Marin's.

Hurley's.

"It is my prayer that there will always be friendship between your people and my people."

What could go wrong?

He thought of Lee, missing her. And he wondered how Sandy was coming along. . . .

High in the mountains, where the eagle-winds cry out their icy power against the rocks, the snow was falling in a blanket of white. It was too high for trees to grow, and there was little shelter on the wild outcropping where Tino Sandoval stood.

He was alone, his boots knee-deep in crusted snow, his eyes narrowed against the cutting wind. His breath, filtered through his mask that concentrated the natural oxygen in the air, was a cloud of freezing vapor that blew away even as it formed.

Far below him, miles away, he could see the flat plains baking in an autumn sun. The cold had not yet come to the lowlands, and still he stood with his legs half-buried in the middle of winter.

"Sunlight and plants and animals and water," he said to himself, speaking in a whisper that would have been audible had there been anyone to hear. Sandoval had often talked to himself at Spring Lake; indeed, he had written that no man was ever lonely when he could talk to himself with understanding. "It is always the same, wherever man lives, in whatever time."

Sunlight. All life came from the sun. Without the energy of a sun, there could be no life. Many peoples, including some of his own ancestors, had bowed down before the sun, and perhaps they had worshipped more wisely than they knew.

Plants. If the sunlight falls on bare soil, there is heat, which is lost when the cool night comes. But with grass or leaves it is a different story. The chlorophyll takes the sun's energy and builds with it, blending air and water and soil to make new leaves and new grasses. The energy is not given up with the night, but is stored. It waits patiently in green forests and waving fields of grass, and then the animals come. . . .

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Animals. They eat the grass and plants and leaves, storing and concentrating the energy in their bodies. And then the grass-eaters are devoured in turn by the meat-eaters, and these may also be eaten, or may die and release their energy again to the living plants. Life is a vast pyramid. Each layer feeds on the layer beneath it, and all live on the sun that is the pyramid's base. Man stands alone atop the pyramid, and in his pride he imagines that he is independent. It is only when he is thirsty or when his land blows away that he remembers the rain, the magic of water. . . .

Water. Sandoval nudged the snow with his boot. Water had given birth to life, and life could not survive without it. On Earth, it had taken five thousand pounds of water to produce a single pound of wheat. The water began here, falling from the clouds as the snow that covered the ground and melted against his face. The snow would lie on the ground all winter, waiting. Further down the mountain, where the trees grew, banks of snow should accumulate in the shade. It would melt only slowly, and the insulating blanket of conifer needles would prevent the freezing of the soil underneath. The water would sink gradually into the sponge-like humus, and filter down and down, until the mountain became a reservoir of stored water, until great underground rivers flowed and seeped into the soil, giving life. When it reached the plains, the dry vegetation would suck it up, and some of the water would bubble up to the surface in clear springs, and creeks and brooks would feed the rivers that ran forever to the sea.

That was under normal conditions, of course.

Conditions here were not normal. That was the trouble.

The land had been touched by fire and flood and famine. The forests were gone, the grasslands dead. When the water came, it splattered out into the sun-baked plains that could not absorb it. The water gushed through straight gullies and into rivers, carrying what was left of the topsoil with it. The silt-filled rivers rushed the brown flood away to the sea, and it was useless.

Sandoval shook his head, turned, and began to trudge down toward his copter. The wind cut at his face and his feet were cold in his boots. It was so easy to bring death to the land. . . .

He passed through a fire-blackened forest, its branches naked against the winter wind. He knew the forest well, every tree of it. He and his men had worked hard these many months, and Sandoval had been happy. This was work he believed in, and work he loved.

He had killed a million beetles in that dead bark, planted a million trees in that barren soil, cal-

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culated innumerable bacteria counts for the forest that would come again.

And woodpeckers! They looked very much like the woodpeckers of Earth, although they were of different species. After all, he reflected, a woodpecker is such a specialized bird that it has to follow a certain design: a long sturdy bill to drill under the bark with, feet to grip the bark while it works, tail feathers with supporting tips to hold it steady. They had hatched enough woodpeckers to stuff a spaceship, and they had not forgotten the nuthatches who would finish the job by getting the insects in the bark crevices.

World-savers?

Yes, they existed.

Not men.

Woodpeckers.

He reached the sheltered valley where his copter waited. He climbed into it with reluctance, despite the cold outside. Sandoval was a man of the land, content to leave the sky for others. He took off and flew down the valley and out into the warm air over the plains.

He smiled a little, looking down at the rolling country. He knew the plains, too. They had broken its baked surface, ploughed it with heavy remote equipment from the ship, poked holes in it to hold the water when it came. They had dug huge contour furrows to hold back the flooding of the rivers. They had caught and were breeding grazing animals to eat the grass that was as yet invisible. And tiny gophers and ground squirrels and rats to paw and tug at the soil, keeping it loose for other rains. And predators to control the grass-eaters. . . .

It wasn't easy to give life back to a dead land.

But Sandoval knew satisfaction. This land would come back, even as it had on a ruined Earth. One day it would be green again, deep with cool grasses, and the towns would return. . . .

The ship glinted before him, silver in the afternoon sun. The sight brought mixed feelings to Tino Sandoval. For just a moment, his vision clouded, and the ship became another ship, a wooden ship on a sea of blue, its sails puffed with the wind. Sandoval was an Indian, and he remembered.

The face of Admiral Hurley was too much like the faces that stared proudly from the pages of history books. The hand that he had shaken was too much like the hand that had been red with Mexico's blood.

(He had washed his hands thoroughly after he had shaken hands with the admiral. He had called himself a superstitious fool, but he had rubbed his hands on the towel until they hurt.)

And Evan Schaefer. A quiet man, a man easy to underestimate. Sandoval had known men like him

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before, men who could not be pushed, men who stood by your side when the chips were down. Men like Schaefer were rare in any age. He liked Evan Schaefer and his wife, but he knew he would never tell them so. He had found some late wildflowers in the valley, and he would put them in Lee's cabin.

She would know who had given them to her, being the kind of woman she was. Sandoval had known many women, but never one like Lee. She made him sad for all the years that might have been.

He landed the copter by the ship.

He had not seen Schaefer for many months. He hoped Schaefer was doing all right. . . .

Almost a year had passed since he had first glimpsed the town of the people, which they called Home-of-the-World, and Evan Schaefer knew now what he had to do.

The old priest Loquav, with his near-sighted eyes and silver fur, had taught him many things besides the language of the people. He had taught him a religion that on one level was an erotic cast of harvest-goddesses and rain-gods, and on another level was a moving symbol of man's ties to the land on which he lived, the air he breathed, and the sun that warmed him. He had taken him out into the streets of Home-of-the-World, and into the poor houses. There he had seen the suffering and privation he had not seen in the market square: the tired women, the empty-eyed men, the silent and hungry children. He had spoken to him of other times, when the people had been as the grass of the fields, and the granaries had been choked with food.

And old Loquav had done more than that. He had made Schaefer feel at home with the people. He had given him the warmth of friendship in a hard winter. He had looked at a being who was monstrous by his standards, and seen only the man who lived in that body. It was a trick that men of Earth often could not learn.

Loquav had said to him, "I know not if you are man or god or devil, but while we are together you are my brother."

Schaefer had seen Marin twice, and they had talked, but it was a touchy business.

One night, when the red sun had just dipped below the far horizon and the long shadows were painting the adobe roofs with flat black fingers, Schaefer stepped out into the streets alone. He walked toward the market square, where he heard the night-music striking up for dancing.

That was when he saw **it.**

There, in the shadows.

A man who was too big to be of the people, and a thick voice muttering in English. *"Come on, baby,*

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wrap those fine long arms around me, I've been away a long, long time. . . ."

A native girl, curious and afraid, not wishing to offend, standing with her back against an adobe house wall.

Schaefer felt a sickness in his stomach. He hurried on to the market square, where fires were burning brightly and drums were throbbing like heart-beats. He saw more of them, men from the ship, dancing with the girls.

And he saw men of the people, standing in the shadows, watching in silence.

Schaefer did not hesitate. He ran to his copter, climbed into the cabin, and took off into the twilight. There was a black fury raging inside him, and he pushed the copter as fast as it would go, toward the ship and Admiral Hurley.

V

Coming down past the great tower of the ship, he felt like a bug crawling down a flagpole. The copter hit with a puff of dust and Schaefer was out and running almost before it was secured.

He went through the airlock, jerked his oxygen mask off gratefully, and walked straight to Hurley's quarters, his heavy boots leaving a trail of dust behind him on the polished floors. He had been back to the ship twice to see Lee but Hurley came first this trip.

There was an officer outside Hurley's door.

"Just a moment, sir," the man said. "I have strict instructions—"

"Get out of my way, please."

"Sir, the admiral said—"

"This is important. Just say in your report that I overpowered you." Schaefer brushed past the man, while the officer muttered under his breath about civilians in general and Schaefer in particular.

Schaefer knocked on the door, hard.

It opened after a moment.

Schaefer swallowed the remark he had ready. It was Mrs. Hurley who stood before him, a gray-haired, motherly type, with a gentle face made to order for beaming over blueberry pie.

"Yes? Carl is taking a nap right now. . . ."

"I'm very sorry to disturb you, but I must see him. Now."

"Well, I don't know. I do hope there hasn't been any trouble? You must be that anthropologist person Carl told me about."

"Yes, Mrs. Hurley. I'm that anthropologist person, fangs and all. Now, if you'll just—"

"I'll handle this, Martha." Admiral Hurley stepped before her, fully dressed but with signs of sleep still in his eyes. "I'll see you in my office, Schaefer. You know better than to come here."

"I'll be waiting," Schaefer said. He nodded politely to Mrs. Hurley. "A pleasure, ma'am."

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He walked up to Hurley's office, seated himself, and waited.

The admiral let him stew for ten minutes and then came in and sat down behind his desk. His balding head gleamed in the light. His lean, sharp-featured face was expressionless, but his green eyes were cold as ice.

"Well, Mr. Schaefer?"

Schaefer forced himself to be calm. He fished out his pipe and tobacco that he had picked up in his copter and puffed on it until he could taste the fragrant smoke. The admiral had kept him waiting and he was determined to repay the compliment. He blew a lazy smoke-ring at the ceiling.

"Well, Mr. Schaefer? I'm not accustomed to—"

"Neither am I," Schaefer snapped.

The admiral shrugged. "No personalities, please. I assume you have something you want to say to me?"

Schaefer leaned forward, his pipe clamped in his teeth. "You know why I'm here, Hurley."

"I'm afraid I haven't the faintest idea."

"Your men are in the town."

Hurley waved his hand impatiently. "Oh, that. Yes, of course. They have my permission."

Schaefer stood up. "You've got to get them back here."

"I give the orders to my men, Mr. Schaefer. Please remember where you are."

"Dammit, man, this is important! You don't know those people over there. They are very proud. This could ruin everything. If they don't get out, there'll be trouble."

Hurley smiled. "*You* don't know my men, Mr. Schaefer. Men are men. They always know when there are women within ten light-years."

"You don't understand, Admiral. If they're that eager, stick 'em in the icebox until we get through here."

Hurley shook his head. "Can't do that. Regulations specify that a ship landed on alien soil must maintain its crew in constant readiness."

Schaefer felt a chill of despair. Talking to Hurley was like ramming your head against a block of cement. "The people won't stand for it, Hurley."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"Listen, Hurley—"

"No, *you* listen, Mr. Schaefer." The admiral paused, holding himself under control. "I am in command of this ship. I'll give the orders that pertain to the morale and welfare of my men. It is not my will that has kept us on this planet for almost a year. It is not my responsibility that your party took up space that might have been used for other men's wives. You evidently thought it necessary to bring *your* wife along, and I do not condemn you for it. We will leave this planet whenever you inform me that our mission has been

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accomplished. Until that time, I have a crew of men to handle. We are doing a lot for those savages, Mr. Schaefer, and it's costing a lot of money. They can spare a few native women. I know the type; they're all the same."

"You've never even been over to look at them. Is that all they are to you—savages?"

Hurley shrugged.

"Answer me!"

"You are the ones who make the definitions, Mr. Schaefer. The rest of us have work to do. No one is forcing the natives to do anything. If they are overflowing with virtue, they will conduct themselves accordingly."

"With a gang of sex-hungry crewmen? You know better than that, Hurley."

The admiral got to his feet. "Was there anything else you wished to see me about?"

Schaefer was suddenly conscious that his fists were clenched at his sides, clenched so tightly that his fingers ached. *Oh, to take just one swing at that damned supercilious jaw!*

He forced himself to calm down.

"There's going to be trouble. You've been warned, Hurley, and I'll hold you personally responsible for whatever happens."

"Thank you for your warning," the admiral said evenly. "I'll take it under advisement."

"Thanks a lot."

Schaefer turned and left.

The thing had started now, and there would be no stopping it.

Hurry, hurry!

He found Lee in their cabin. She was pale and thinner than before, but she was OK. He knew she would always be OK, and that he never had to worry about her again. He stayed with her for two hours, and told her what had happened.

Then he got back in his copter and flew off to find Sandy.

Hurry, hurry!

It was three days before he could return to Home-of-the-World.

Deep beneath the walled town, in the dark temple of the people, Marin the priest-king stood straight and still, his dark eyes burning like the lamps that ringed the chamber walls. His long arms were hidden beneath the folds of his robe and his canine teeth flashed in the light when he spoke.

"You told me long ago that you came as a friend to help my people, Schaefer. I took your words for truth, for no man lies to his friend. My people have taken you in, fed you through a hard winter when the sun was pale, taught you our tongue. Now men of your own kind descend on the people like a plague. They take our women in the shadows and mock our Home-of-the-World. This must not be, this cannot be. Speak, Schaefer, for you have many things to explain."

Schaefer felt the weight of a city

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on his back, doubly heavy because Home-of-the-World was his home now, just as the men of the ship were men who might have been his brothers. A man caught in the middle was seldom lucky, he thought, despite the old joke. "All my words to you have been true words, Marin. In your heart you know this. There are many men in my tribe and I cannot control them all. You must endure those of my kind who make a mockery of your people and your traditions. You must tolerate them. There is no other way."

"And why must I do these things?"

"If there is trouble, my friend, I cannot help you. You must believe me when I say that my people are very powerful. It is better to let them alone."

The priest-king shook his head. "They do not let us alone," he pointed out, "and you have not helped me yet, Schaefer."

Schaefer took a deep breath. It was now or never. Marin would not be put off much longer with promises, not with strange men walking the streets of Home-of-the-World.

"Will you come with me, Marin? Will you let me take you into the sky in my machine? Will you let me *show* you how we have helped you, if you can no longer accept my word?"

The priest-king hesitated and seemed to withdraw into the shadows of the vault. "This would not be a good time to leave my people."

"Marin is not afraid?"

The priest-king drew himself up proudly.

"I will go with you," he said. "When do we leave?"

"Right now."

"Let it be so."

Side by side, the two men walked out of Marin's chamber, into the large cavern with its hundreds of lamps burning, its black altar waiting in the alcove, its little rings of dark woodpecker-scalps hanging on the walls. Then up through the long winding corridor, and out into the dazzling sunlight.

The copter was waiting for them under the open sky.

Spring had come again to the land of the people, a powder of green sprinkled across the plains, a scattering of tiny spots of red and blue and yellow that were flowers in the sun. It was not a spring as Marin had seen it in his youth, when he had run barefoot with the other boys through dew-wet grasses and swung with them on the strong forest branches that laced the roof of the world, but it was a better spring than he had seen these later years, and a spring he had feared he might never see again.

It marked a turning point. That was the important thing.

Marin stared down at the rolling plains, cool with the fresh delicate

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green of new grass. His quick dark eyes caught the sparkle of fresh water in the streams, not the yellow-brown floods of mud that roared to the river, but living water to give the world a drink.

The copter had not impressed him much; it was alien magic.

The miracle he saw below him did impress him. This was a magic worth knowing.

"The land is coming back," he said simply.

"Yes. Next year it will be better still."

"How have you done this thing, Schaefer?"

"That's what I'm going to try to show you. It will not be easy for you."

"My people will do anything. When the land dies, the people follow. I have looked long at our children, and wondered."

Schaefer landed in a valley where a young forest had been planted. Even with their artificial growth techniques, the trees were little more than shrubs. But they were growing.

He led Marin up a winding trail to where green shoots were searching for life in the ruins of a fire-blackened growth of dead conifers. New flowers covered the forest floor and there was a hum of insects in the air.

There was another sound, too, cutting through the silence like a million hammers.

Woodpeckers.

Schaefer ripped away a chunk of dead black bark. A horde of beetles scrabbled for cover in the riddled wood underneath. A brave woodpecker buzzed past his face, eager to get at the bugs before they vanished under the bark.

Schaefer found a stump and sat down. Marin stood watching the woodpecker a moment, then he sat down beside Schaefer.

"You talk," he said. "I will listen."

Schaefer groped for eloquence in a foreign tongue. He told Marin as best he could what had happened to the ghost of a forest they saw around them. It had been a combination of many things, but he simplified the story to get his point across. It only took a little thing to kill the land, a tiny thing, an insignificant thing.

Like a woodpecker.

The people hunted woodpeckers, because they valued their black scalps as a wealth symbol. Every house had some woodpecker scalps; without them, a man was a pauper. The temple had thousands of them hanging in circles on the walls. Under ordinary circumstances, this wouldn't have mattered. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred nothing would happen.

But it had happened this time.

Nature was a living fabric, a neatly balanced system in which every organism had a job to do. The woodpecker's job was to drill into the bark of trees to get the

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beetles that lived there. Not all of them, of course. Just enough to keep the beetle population down to where the living tree could handle it.

Take some woodpeckers away. Take them away in a bad year, when the remaining woodpeckers fail to rebuild the forest woodpecker families. A tree falls in a windstorm, and then another. Their roots are broken, their sap runs weakly. The remaining woodpeckers cannot reach the beetles that attack the tree where it lies on the ground.

The beetles breed and thrive and multiply.

Other trees become riddled with the bugs, and they die and fall. They lie on the ground, and they dry out. Dead dry wood, waiting—

A storm. Dark clouds massed in a turbulent sky. A flash of lightning, a crash of thunder. Another stab of lightning, another—

The dry wood is ignited.

The forest is in flames. The winds blow, and carry the flames to other trees. An entire watershed is destroyed, and this happens in many places.

The snow falls in the winter, piling up in drifts. With the spring sun it melts, and there is nothing to hold it. It rushes down the mountains in torrents, across the plains in a flood, into the rivers that rage toward the sea in a yellow-brown torrent of land-destroying fury—

The land dies. The grasses and animals disappear. There is no life-giving water in the soil. The winds blow, and the dust swirls in ugly clouds through the deserted towns where the people once lived and laughed and hoped. . . .

There was a long silence, broken only by the hum of insects and the *rat-tat-tat* of the woodpeckers.

"It is hard to believe," Marin said finally. "All that from a few woodpeckers."

"There were other things. The woodpecker, as it happens, was critical here."

"But the woodpecker scalp is wealth to us." Marin spread his hands, his long arms outstretched. "You know how men are."

You know how men are.

I know, I know.

"I will show you greater wealth," Schaefer said slowly.

He led the way back through the dawning life to the copter. He reached into the cabin and pulled out a sack.

"Hold out your hands, Marin."

He poured a pile of glittering gold coins into the waiting hands.

"I will teach you to make these. And there are other things you must learn about the land you live on."

They got into the copter, and it lifted into the air. They flew back over the plains that were living again, pale green in the spring sun.

And all the way back the sunlight glinted on the shiny gold

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coins that the priest-king ran through his fingers, over and over again.

Another year rushed by in Home-of-the-World. For Schaefer, it was a year of hard work and worry. He pulled a lot of cultural strings, getting across the idea that his gold coins were pleasing to the gods, while the woodpecker scalps were not. He showed the people where to find the gold in the streams, and what to do with it when they had it. He had some of the UN men demonstrate what could be done with a plot of land if the people would adopt a few improved farming techniques. There was a great deal of disease in the town, but he knew better than to introduce modern medicines which would only result in a population explosion that would negate everything else that had been done.

He worried as hard as he worked. Perhaps he was a natural worrier; Lee had always told him that he was. But it was an explosive situation, and it was only a matter of time before the fuse caught fire. His only hope was to finish his work and get out before disaster struck.

Fortunately, there were no pregnancies among the girls of the town who were running around with the crewmen of the ship. The men had sense enough to take their pills, and that helped.

Unfortunately, it took time for grass to grow, time for forests to come back, time for the water to seep down into the reservoirs of the mountains.

Sandy and his men nursed the trees along, and readied the different animals for the grasslands and the forests.

And, miraculously, the thing that Schaefer feared did not come for many long months.

But it finally came.

It came with shattering abruptness.

Two men from the ship, drunk on native beer, attacked a respected girl, daughter of a nobleman. The girl crawled home through the garbage in the streets, and she died horribly.

The young men of Home-of-the-World did not wait for Marin to tell them what to do. They had seen their women taken from them for too long and they had swallowed their pride until it stuck in their throats.

Their rage was a flame swinging along the walls of the town.

Hundreds of them shouted together and became a mob, an avalanche of vengeance. They caught four innocent crewmen in their streets and they killed them very slowly, pulling their bodies apart with their immensely strong arms.

Then they took the pieces and threw them into a dark shop where other men from Earth were drinking.

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Riot thundered in the walled adobe town, and out into the fields beyond. Within two hours the streets were deserted, the square windows black. There was silence in Home-of-the-World, the silence of the death that had been and the death that was yet to be.

All but one of the living crewmen ran from the town and rode their copters back to the ship. But the people caught one of them, and kept him alive. A hundred men bound his arms and dragged him out into the fields. Torches were lighted and songs were chanted, and the whole mob set out across the plains toward the ship, waving their spears and bows and clubs.

Schaefer was hidden in a tiny room beneath the temple. He did not dare show his face in the streets, for his face was white and that was enough for the men of the people.

"We've got to stop them," he whispered. "We've got to stop them before they reach the ship. They'll be wiped out, every last one of them."

Old Loquav, his short-sighted eyes blinking in the dim light of the lamp, shook his silver-furred head sadly. "It is said among my people that death can race between two tribes faster than the wind."

"Could you stop them, if you could reach them in time?"

The old priest shrugged. "Marin has already left Home-of-the-World to advise his people. But words spoken in a storm are torn from the mouth and are not heard."

"He won't make it, Loquav. Is my copter safe?"

"The machine has not been harmed."

"Could we get to it?"

"There is a way."

The gloom pressed in upon them with the weight of centuries.

"Come on! We've got to do what we can."

Loquav shook his head. "I must do what must be done," he said, looking at Schaefer. "You, my friend, must rejoin your people. That is the way of the world."

There was no time for argument.

The old priest led the way, and the two men hurried along a dark twisting tunnel toward the stars.

The copter overtook the mob when it was a little over a mile from the ship. From the air, the people were a blaze of orange torches in the night, a nightmare of phantom shadows against the starlit silver of the plains.

"Put me down between my people and your people," Loquav said. "Be careful that you do not get trapped within range of the arrows, for an arrow asks not a man's motive."

Schaefer could not see the captive crewman, but he knew he was there. He toyed with the notion of trying to land the copter in the midst of the torches in an attempt to snatch the man to freedom, but

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he knew that the plan would not work.

He flew on, then skidded the copter to a halt on the level plains a few hundred yards from the marching men. He could hear the drums now, and the chants that filled the night with sound. There was grass under the copter where there had been dust two years ago, but that counted for nothing now.

Loquav touched his shoulder. "Goodby, my friend," he said. "I will remember you with kindness in my heart."

The old priest climbed down from the cabin, turned his near-sighted eyes toward the torch-flames, and began to walk steadily to meet his people.

Schaefer skimmed the copter over the grass until he reached the ship. He left it with the other copters and the airlock opened to take him in.

"Glad you made it, Schaefer," an officer said. "We were worried about you."

Schaefer tore off his mask. "Where's Hurley?"

"Control room. They've got the negatives on the scope. Bill Bergman is still alive, but he looks bad."

"Bergman the one they caught?"

"That's right. He's a good kid, Dr. Schaefer."

"They're all good kids."

He ran through a ship tense with excitement and hurried into the control room. It was fully staffed and ready for action. Admiral Hurley stared at a viewscreen, his face taut with worry.

"Schaefer?"

"Yes."

"I want you to look at this."

Schaefer looked. The people were clear in the screen; he could see their thin faces, their long arms, their eyes burning in the torch-light. He saw Bill Bergman too—hardly more than a boy, with close-cropped hair and wide, terrified eyes. Four of the people were carrying Bergman, one for every arm and leg.

They were going to tear him apart.

He saw old Loquav, his back to the ship, waving his arms and talking to them. The people pushed him out of the way and came on.

The admiral's voice was surprisingly hushed when he spoke. It was the voice of an honest man who faced his mistake squarely. "I was wrong, Dr. Schaefer. That will not bring those boys back."

"No, it won't. It's too late now."

He stared at the people. A maddened mob of savages—yes, if you looked at it that way. But they were men as well, men who had taken all they could take, men who had been pushed too far. They were remembering their wives and daughters, and the men who had come among them in friendship.

"Our fire is accurate," Hurley said. "We can pick them off without touching Bergman."

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Schaefer nodded, his stomach a sick knot inside him. A simple choice. A hundred men who would never have a chance for a boy who had meant no harm.

The torches came closer. The people stopped.

They held Bergman's body up, ready to pull it to pieces.

Hurley turned to Schaefer with a stricken face.

"You decide," he whispered.

The four men began to pull, slowly.

Schaefer closed his eyes. "Don't hit the priest," he said. "He was only trying to stop them."

The admiral straightened up.

"Fire!" he ordered.

VI

There on that shadowed night-land, beneath the radiance of the stars, the men of the people fell like wheat severed by the scythe. They fell one by one, the shock of amazement on their faces, when they still had faces. They fell and they writhed briefly in the cool green of the grass, and then they moved no more.

It was over in seconds.

Perhaps it was an accident, perhaps not. Schaefer never knew. But old Loquav fell with the rest, his close-sighted eyes at last giving up the struggle to see.

Only the boy named Bill Bergman remained on his feet, while the torch-flames flared and sputtered around him like the fires of hell. He covered his face with his hands and stumbled toward the ship.

"Go out and bring him in," Hurley ordered. There was no triumph in his voice.

"I'm going too," Schaefer said.

The admiral nodded. "Yes. Maybe we ought to see it up close. Maybe we owe them that, at least."

They left the ship and walked through the starlight across the grass they had planted. They walked up to the pile of bodies and there was nothing to say.

Schaefer found the old priest, and cradled Loquav's silver head in his arms. He could not even cry.

"Shall we bury them?" Hurley asked finally.

"No. No, I don't think so. We can't give them a burial that would have any meaning for them. These are not our dead. Their people will come for them."

"What can we do?"

"We can get the blazes out of here before there's any more killing. It's all over, Carl. I can never go back to the town again, even if Marin himself would be willing—he couldn't control the others after what's happened here tonight."

Hurley seemed to be searching for some words that didn't exist. He finally said, "Were you nearly finished?"

"It all depends. I think Sandy has his end pretty well taken care

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of. I thought I had Marin ready to do what was necessary—now I don't know."

"I wish there was something I could do."

You've done enough, pal, Schaefer thought, then choked off the feeling. Hurley at least knew when he had made a mistake, which was more than could be said for most men. "You can get this ship away right now, tonight, as fast as you can. That's all there is left to us."

Schaefer looked across the starlit plains toward the town the people called Home-of-the-World. He knew those rolling plains were far from empty. Out there in the long silence of the night, Marin was standing, watching him, wondering.

Don't let it all have been for nothing, old friend, Schaefer prayed. *Try to remember the good with the rest. Try not to think too badly of me when you grieve for your dead. Keep your land always, priest-king, and use it well.*

He touched Loquav's wet shoulder in a last goodbye. The flames of the torches hissed in the grass, burning themselves out. The other dead, the nameless ones, were stacked like cordwood in the shadows.

Schaefer remembered words from long ago. *"It is my prayer that there will always be friendship between your people and my people."*

Had there been other men, in other times, who had voiced that prayer in vain?

He turned and followed the living back toward the ship. The stars were bright above him, and they had never seemed so far away.

The men from Earth could not leave that night.

It was late the next afternoon before Sandy agreed to come in from his forest, where he had been adjusting the wildlife balance in the ecological system he had set up. When he got out of his copter he walked over to the terrible dark pile under the hot red sun and looked at it in tight-lipped silence.

He said nothing to Hurley when he entered the ship, and his only question to Schaefer was about Benito Moravia. After that he was silent and withdrawn, as though seeking to disassociate himself from the men around him.

The great ship lifted on the soundless power of her antigravs, a silver giant drifting up the ladder of the sky. She rose into flame-edged clouds, and beyond them through the peaceful blue of the atmosphere.

She entered the bright silence of space, and her atomics splashed white flame into the sea that washed the shores of forever.

She was going home.

Where the ship had been, there was a hushed quiet. It was a hot and windless day, and the grass hardly moved under the glare of

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the red sun. Miles away, toward the mountains, a herd of animals snorted nervously, and lifted their heads from the clean streams that chuckled down from the hills where new forests grew.

And the dead were very still.

The people came with the evening shadows. Brothers and wives and sweethearts and fathers and mothers, they picked through the bodies, searching for faces they had known. And then they carried their dead back through the merciful darkness to Home-of-the-World.

Marin the priest-king went directly to his temple, where torches flamed around the walls and he could not hear the mourning songs of his people. He knelt before the dark altar and closed his eyes.

He saw old Loquav, who had padded through these corridors when Marin was yet a boy. He saw all his people, who had trusted him, and now were gone.

He saw other things as well.

He saw sweet grass where there had been no grass. He saw streams with clear water, where you could count the pebbles on the bottom and drink until your eyes ached. He saw trees and flowers where there had been only naked fire-blackened ghosts.

He saw children of his people, no longer hungry and frightened, and he saw their children beyond them, fading into the gray mists of all the years that were to come.

Marin the priest-king prayed a very hard prayer. He prayed for the safety of the ship that had come from the skies, and now was going back to a land he would never see.

Then he opened his eyes and prayed a much easier prayer.

He prayed that the ship would never again come to the people who lived in Home-of-the-World.

The ship sailed a starbright sea, and the years whispered by like wind-blown sands where winds and sands could never be.

Schaefer lay frozen in his slot, with tubes in his nostrils and a mask covering his sightless eyes. He felt nothing now, and there are no dreams in death.

But before the nothingness had come, when the doctor had taken his body from the warm slab and the medics had carried him through the lock and into the glistening catacombs where he would spend the voyage to Earth in not-life, he had seen faces before his freezing eyes.

Lee's, framed by soft brown hair, warming him even as the blood slowed in his veins.

Sandy's, lost in self-accusation that reached far back into the past, back into a time when his own people had been visited by ships that had sailed strange seas.

Hurley's, lean and composed now beneath his balding head, hiding the failure that crawled through his chest.

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Loquav.

Marin.

And, most of all, the haunted face and tortured eyes of Benito Moravia.

Moravia, waiting and wondering and fearing, as the long years crept by . . .

The ship touched down on Earth twelve years and two months from the day of its departure. It landed at night, in secrecy. No bands played, no one greeted them.

Its arrival was never publicly announced.

Moravia, of course, was informed that it had landed.

Schaefer and his wife hurried home, knowing that he would be waiting for them there.

Their house floated at five thousand feet, a cool green island in the gold of the sun. Time had passed it by, and it was unchanged, waiting for them.

This was like a thousand other homecomings they had known. They had gone out, perhaps to eat at Rocky Falls, as they had done so often now that they were alone. They were coming back, on an ordinary afternoon in a familiar world, with only a threat of rain blowing in from the west to hint at anything unusual.

But there was already a copter in the garage.

They landed and went inside. Schaefer held his wife's arm; Lee was very tired, although she was trying not to show it. Their home was soothing around them, its redwood walls warm and welcoming.

An old man rose from his chair as they entered. A cigarette trembled slightly in his blue-veined hand. The hair that had been black was a faded gray. The haunted brown eyes were tired, and the lines in the face had deepened.

For Benito Moravia, it had been twelve tough years.

"Lee," he said. "Evan."

Moved by an impulse she did not attempt to understand, Lee went to him and kissed him on the cheek. Schaefer stepped forward and gripped a hand that had little strength left in it.

"Hello, Ben," he said.

"I heard about everything," the old man said. "Got an abstract of Hurley's report. Is Sandy with you?"

Schaefer hesitated. "He didn't want to come," he said finally.

Moravia nodded. "I can understand that. I knew he would feel that way."

Lee broke the silence. "Can I get you a drink, Ben?"

"I could use one." He smiled faintly. "Ulcer or no ulcer. How does it feel to see a man get old while you stay young, Evan?"

Schaefer didn't answer that one.

They sat and sipped at their drinks, sensing the tension in the room. Schaefer could not face the old man before him and ask the questions that had to be asked. He

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was certain of the answers, and Ben had been hurt enough already.

The house swayed with a barely perceptible motion as a gust of wind hit it. It was darker outside now, and the sun was hidden behind a bank of black-edged clouds. It was going to rain, and rain hard. Schaefer could have lifted the house over the storm, but he made no move, letting it come.

They were on their second drink. An electric hush surrounded them, that breathless calm that welcomes the rain. Moravia looked at the floor and began to talk.

"You're wondering why I did it."

Schaefer waited, neither confirming nor denying the statement.

"I took a chance," Moravia said. "I took a long chance, maybe. A man has to do that sometimes. But I didn't know, I couldn't know . . ."

His voice trailed off.

They waited for him.

"More than a hundred natives. Four men from the crew. That's a lot of lives to have on your conscience." Moravia looked up at them, as though asking for their accusation.

Lee said, "Do you mean you *knew* what was going to happen? Is that what you're trying to say? Could you have—"

Her husband's hand silenced her with a touch.

The taut hush was unbearable, waiting.

"Go on, Ben," Schaefer said.

Moravia talked rapidly, wanting to get it out, wanting to get rid of it. "I knew when I first went to Dr. Schaefer that there would be trouble. I hoped it would be minor; I should have known better. But even the machines can't tell you *everything*. There *had* to be an incident, Lee. Can't you see that?"

He looked at her, his eyes pleading.

She looked away.

"A man in my position has to make decisions. That's what he's there for. They are seldom pleasant ones." He lit a cigarette, inhaled it deeply. "Here were a people facing ruin if I did not act. You saw the land, you know what would have happened to them. I could have closed my eyes, stuck to the letter of the law. I could have let them die, and no one would have questioned that course."

"I know that, Ben," Schaefer said.

The wind came up again, rustling through the room, heavy with the wet smell of rain. Thunder rolled gently in the west.

"The law said that the fourth planet of Aldebaran was forbidden to us." The old man bit the words out, hating them. "It's a good law, we all know that. That world is defenseless, and they have a right to be let alone. And yet I *had* to break that law, or hundreds of thousands of people would starve. You all saw that, but you only saw half the problem. I had to

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break that law—*and I had to break it in such a way that it would never be broken again.* I had to make absolutely certain that the only precedent I set was a bad one. There *had* to be trouble. Otherwise—"

"The story would have leaked out," Schaefer finished for him. "Men would point to what you had done the next time they wanted to go back to some helpless people. They could have used our trip as a justification for damned near anything. They could say that it had been tried once, and no one had suffered, so why can't we just get those minerals, trade with those natives, start just a *tiny* colony? It would have been the beginning of the end, for millions of human beings. I know why you did what you did, Ben."

Moravia went on as though he had not heard, speaking tonelessly as though reading an indictment. "I put Hurley in command of that ship because I knew he would make the mistakes he made. I picked the men of the crew, because I knew they would act as they acted. I sent *you* out there, knowing you might not come back. I wanted an incident, and I got one. We're safe on that score, for what it's worth. No government will ever speak out about this voyage, because they all share the responsibility. The UN will never talk. Hurley will keep his mouth shut or face a court martial. The law is safe, Evan. We spent a hundred lives and saved hundreds of thousands. I've tried to tell myself that's a good record. I've tried. . . ."

"If you had known how many would be killed—if you had known for certain that even one life would be lost—would you have gone ahead?"

The old man stood up. He was very thin and his head was bowed. "It's too much for any man to decide, Evan. I'm probably ruined—my career, everything—and I don't even know whether I did right or wrong. I don't know what the words mean any longer. I tried to kill myself when I heard what I had done, and I couldn't even do that."

Lee went to his side, touched his arm, not speaking, making no judgments.

Moravia turned and looked into Schaefer's eyes. "You were there, Evan. You saw it all. What should I have done, Evan? Tell me. *What should I have done?*"

Schaefer saw again the green grass of the plains, the trees of a new forest, a living land where there had been only death. And he saw old Loquav, and four crewmen ripped apart, and a dark pile of bodies under a hot red sun.

"No man can answer that, Ben," he said softly.

Almost blindly, Moravia stumbled out onto the porch, where the cool wind was fresh in his face. Schaefer joined him there, feeling

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the coming storm. They stood side by side, separated by a gulf no words could bridge.

A tongue of pure white lightning licked down from black clouds. The world held its breath and then the thunder crashed and boomed away with the wind. Lights came on like yellow fireflies in the darkness, and far below them the tree-tops danced in the shadows.

A gray wall of water swept over them, drenching them, but they hardly noticed.

They stood there on a house in the sky, each alone, looking down into the wildness of the wind, watching the driving sheets of rain that cleansed their Earth.

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Science fiction is used to the phenomenon of the Prolific Prodigy; but it looks as though young Robert Silverberg may set new records. He sold his first story, to Scotland's Nebula, *when he was 18; he's now in his very early twenties, and* Warm Man *marks his 175th sale. He has appeared in very nearly every extant s.f. magazine, as well as assorted publications devoted to crime, sports, the West and other topics; he has published one juvenile novel* (REVOLT ON ALPHA C, *Crowell, 1955); and anywhere from one to four adult books of his, with various by-lines (of which he employs 13), should appear in 1957. With all of this energetic output, Silverberg is far from being a mere fertile hack; there's insight and sympathy in his F&SF debut—the story of a man's intense receptive warmth, which masked . . . what?*

Warm Man

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

NO ONE WAS EVER QUITE SURE JUST when Mr. Hallinan came to live in New Brewster. Lonny Dewitt, who ought to know, testified that Mr. Hallinan died on December 3, at 3:30 in the afternoon, but as for the day of his arrival no one could be nearly so precise.

It was simply that one day there was no one living in the unoccupied split-level on Melon Hill, and then the next *he* was there, seemingly having grown out of the woodwork during the night, ready and willing to spread his cheer and warmth throughout the whole of the small suburban community.

Daisy Moncrieff, New Brewster's ineffable hostess, was responsible for making the first overtures toward Mr. Hallinan. It was two days after she had first observed lights on in the Melon Hill place that she decided the time had come to scrutinize the newcomers, to determine their place in New Brewster society. Donning a light wrap, for it was a coolish October day, she left her house in early forenoon and went on foot down Copperbeech Road to the Melon Hill turnoff, and then climbed the sloping hill till she reached the split-level.

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The name was already on the mailbox: DAVIS HALLINAN. That probably meant they'd been living there a good deal longer than just two days, thought Mrs. Moncrieff; perhaps they'd be insulted by the tardiness of the invitation? She shrugged and used the door-knocker.

A tall man in early middle age appeared, smiling benignly. Mrs. Moncrieff was thus the first recipient of the uncanny warmth that Davis Hallinan was to radiate throughout New Brewster before his strange death. His eyes were deep and solemn, with warm lights shining in them; his hair was a dignified gray-white mane.

"Good morning," he said. His voice was deep, mellow.

"Good morning. I'm Mrs. Moncrieff—*Daisy* Moncrieff, from the big house down on Copperbeech Road. You must be Mr. Hallinan. May I come in?"

"Ah—please, no, Mrs. Moncrieff. The place is still a chaos. Would you mind staying on the porch?"

He closed the door behind him—Mrs. Moncrieff later claimed that she had a fleeting view of the interior and saw unpainted walls and dust-covered bare floors—and drew one of the rusty porch chairs for her.

"Is your wife at home, Mr. Hallinan?"

"There's just me, I'm afraid. I live alone."

"Oh." Mrs. Moncrieff, discomforted, managed a grin none the less. In New Brewster *everyone* was married; the idea of a bachelor or a widower coming to settle there was strange, disconcerting . . . and just a little pleasant, she added, surprised at herself.

"My purpose in coming was to invite you to meet some of your new neighbors tonight—if you're free, that is. I'm having a cocktail party at my place about six, with dinner at seven. We'd be so happy if you came!"

His eyes twinkled gaily. "Certainly, Mrs. Moncrieff. I'm looking forward to it already."

The ne plus ultra of New Brewster society was impatiently assembled at the Moncrieff home shortly after 6, waiting to meet Mr. Hallinan, but it was not until 6:15 that he arrived. By then, thanks to Daisy Moncrieff's fearsome skill as a hostess, everyone present was equipped with a drink and with a set of speculations about the mysterious bachelor on the hill.

"I'm sure he must be a writer," said Martha Weede to liverish Dudley Heyer. "Daisy says he's tall and distinguished and just *radiates* personality. He's probably here only for a few months—just long enough to get to know us all, and then he'll write a novel about us."

"Hmm. Yes," Heyer said. He was an advertising executive who

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commuted to Madison Avenue every morning; he had an ulcer, and was acutely conscious of his role as a stereotype. "Yes, then he'll write a sizzling novel exposing suburban decadence, or a series of acid sketches for *The New Yorker*. I know the type."

Lys Erwin, looking desirable and just a bit disheveled after her third martini in thirty minutes, drifted by in time to overhear that. "You're *always* conscious of *types,* aren't you, darling? You and your gray flannel suit?"

Heyer fixed her with a baleful stare but found himself, as usual, unable to make an appropriate retort. He turned away, smiled hello at quiet little Harold and Jane Dewitt, whom he pitied somewhat (their son Lonny, age 9, was a shy, sensitive child, a total misfit among his playmates) and confronted the bar, weighing the probability of a night of acute agony against the immediate desirability of a Manhattan.

But at that moment Daisy Moncrieff reappeared with Mr. Hallinan in tow, and conversation ceased abruptly throughout the parlor while the assembled guests stared at the newcomer. An instant later, conscious of their collective *faux pas,* the group began to chat again, and Daisy moved among her guests, introducing her prize.

"Dudley, this is Mr. Davis Hallinan. Mr. Hallinan, I want you to meet Dudley Heyer, one of the most talented men in New Brewster."

"Indeed? What do you do, Mr. Heyer?"

"I'm in advertising. But don't let them fool you; it doesn't take any talent at all. Just brass, nothing else. The desire to delude the public, and delude 'em good. But how about you? What line are you in?"

Mr. Hallinan ignored the question. "I've always thought advertising was a richly creative field, Mr. Heyer. But, of course, I've never really known at first hand—"

"Well, I have. And it's everything they say it is." Heyer felt his face reddening, as if he had had a drink or two. He was becoming talkative, and found Hallinan's presence oddly soothing. Leaning close to the newcomer, Heyer said, "Just between you and me, Hallinan, I'd give my whole bank account for a chance to stay home and *write.* Just write. I want to do a novel. But I don't have the guts; that's my trouble. I know that come Friday there's a $350 check waiting on my desk, and I don't dare give that up. So I keep writing my novel up here in my head, and it keeps eating me away down here in my gut. *Eating.*" He paused, conscious that he had said too much and that his eyes were glittering beadily.

Hallinan wore a benign smile. "It's always sad to see talent hid-

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den, Mr. Heyer. I wish you well."

Daisy Moncrieff appeared then, hooked an arm through Hallinan's, and led him away. Heyer, alone, stared down at the textured gray broadloom.

Now why did I tell him all that? he wondered. A minute after meeting Hallinan, he had unburdened his deepest woe to him—something he had not confided in anyone else in New Brewster, including his wife.

And yet—it had been a sort of catharsis, Heyer thought. Hallinan had calmly soaked up all his grief and inner agony, and left Heyer feeling drained and purified and warm.

Catharsis? Or a blood-letting? Heyer shrugged, then grinned and made his way to the bar to pour himself a Manhattan.

As usual, Lys and Leslie Erwin were at opposite ends of the parlor. Mrs. Moncrieff found Lys more easily, and introduced her to Mr. Hallinan.

Lys faced him unsteadily, and on a sudden impulse hitched her neckline higher. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hallinan. I'd like you to meet my husband Leslie. *Leslie!* Come here, please?"

Leslie Erwin approached. He was twenty years older than his wife, and was generally known to wear the finest pair of horns in New Brewster—a magnificent spread of antlers that grew a new point or two almost every week.

"Les, this is Mr. Hallinan. Mr. Hallinan, meet my husband, Leslie."

Mr. Hallinan bowed courteously to both of them. "Happy to make your acquaintance."

"The same," Erwin said. "If you'll excuse me, now—"

"The louse," said Lys Erwin, when her husband had returned to his station at the bar. "He'd sooner cut his throat than spend two minutes next to me in public." She glared bitterly at Hallinan. "I don't deserve that kind of thing, do I?"

Mr. Hallinan frowned sympathetically. "Have you any children, Mrs. Erwin?"

"Hah! He'd never give me any—not with *my* reputation! You'll have to pardon me; I'm a little drunk."

"I understand, Mrs. Erwin."

"I know. Funny, but I hardly know you and I like you. You seem to *understand*. Really, I mean." She took his cuff hesitantly. "Just from looking at you, I can tell you're not judging me like all the others. I'm not really *bad*, am I? It's just that I get so *bored*, Mr. Hallinan."

"Boredom is a great curse," Mr. Hallinan observed.

"Damn right it is! And Leslie's no help—always reading his newspapers and talking to his brokers! But I can't help myself, believe me." She looked around wildly.

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"They're going to start talking about us in a minute, Mr. Hallinan. Every time I talk to someone new they start whispering. But promise me something—"

"If I can."

"Someday—someday soon—let's get together? I want to *talk* to you. God, I want to talk to someone—someone who understands why I'm the way I am. Will you?"

"Of course, Mrs. Erwin. Soon." Gently he detached her hand from his sleeve, held it tenderly for a moment, and released it. She smiled hopefully at him. He nodded.

"And now I must meet some of the other guests. A pleasure, Mrs. Erwin."

He drifted away, leaving Lys weaving shakily in the middle of the parlor. She drew in a deep breath and lowered her décolletage again.

At least there's one decent man in this town now, she thought. There was something *good* about Hallinan—good, and kind, and understanding.

Understanding. That's what I need. She wondered if she could manage to pay a visit to the house on Melon Hill tomorrow afternoon without arousing too much scandal.

Lys turned and saw thin-faced Aiken Muir staring at her slyly, with a clear-cut invitation on his face. She met his glance with a frigid, wordless *go to hell.*

Mr. Hallinan moved on, on through the party. And, gradually, the pattern of the party began to form. It took shape like a fine mosaic. By the time the cocktail hour was over and dinner was ready, an intricate, complex structure of interacting thoughts and responses had been built.

Mr. Hallinan, always drinkless, glided deftly from one New Brewsterite to the next, engaging each in conversation, drawing a few basic facts about the other's personality, smiling politely, moving on. Not until after he moved on did the person come to a dual realization: that Mr. Hallinan had said quite little, really, and that he had instilled a feeling of warmth and security in the other during their brief talk.

And thus while Mr. Hallinan learned from Martha Weede of her paralyzing envy of her husband's intelligence and of her fear of his scorn, Lys Erwin was able to remark to Dudley Heyer that Mr. Hallinan was a remarkably kind and understanding person. And Heyer, who had never been known to speak a kind word of anyone, for once agreed.

And later, while Mr. Hallinan was extracting from Leslie Erwin some of the pain his wife's manifold infidelities caused him, Martha Weede could tell Lys Erwin, "He's so gentle—why, he's almost like a saint!"

And while little Harold Dewitt

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poured out his fear that his silent 9-year-old son Lonny was in some way subnormal, Leslie Erwin, with a jaunty grin, remarked to Daisy Moncrieff, "That man must be a psychiatrist. Lord, he knows how to talk to a person. Inside of two minutes he had me telling him all my troubles. I feel better for it, too."

Mrs. Moncrieff nodded. "I know what you mean. This morning, when I went up to his place to invite him here, we talked a little while on his porch."

"Well," Erwin said, "if he's a psychiatrist he'll find plenty of business here. There isn't a person here riding around without a private monkey on his back. Take Heyer, over there—he didn't get that ulcer from happiness. That scatterbrain Martha Weede, too—married to a Columbia professor who can't imagine what to talk to her about. And my wife Lys is a very confused person too, of course."

"We all have our problems," Mrs. Moncrieff sighed. "But I feel much better since I spoke with Mr. Hallinan. Yes: *much* better."

Mr. Hallinan was now talking with Paul Jambell, the architect. Jambell, whose pretty young wife was in Springfield Hospital slowly dying of cancer. Mrs. Moncrieff could well imagine what Jambell and Mr. Hallinan were talking about.

Or rather, what Jambell was talking about—for Mr. Hallinan, she realized, did very little talking himself. But he was such a *wonderful* listener! She felt a pleasant glow, not entirely due to the cocktails. It was good to have someone like Mr. Hallinan in New Brewster, she thought. A man of his tact and dignity and warmth would be a definite asset.

When Lys Erwin woke—alone, for a change—the following morning, some of the past night's curious calmness had deserted her.

I have to talk to Mr. Hallinan, she thought.

She had resisted two implied and one overt attempts at seduction the night before, had come home, had managed even to be polite to her husband. And Leslie had been polite to her. It was most unusual.

"That Hallinan," he had said. "He's quite a guy."

"You talked to him too?"

"Yeah. Told him a lot. Too much, maybe. But I feel better for it."

"Odd," she said. "So do I. He's a strange one, isn't he? Wandering around that party, soaking up everyone's aches. He must have had half the neuroses in New Brewster unloaded on his back last night."

"Didn't seem to depress him, though. More he talked to people, more cheerful and affable he got. And us, too. You look more re-

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laxed than you've been in a month, Lys."

"I *feel* more relaxed. As if all the roughness and ugliness in me was drawn out."

And that was how it had felt the next morning, too. Lys woke, blinked, looked at the empty bed across the room. Leslie was long since gone, on his way to the city. She knew she had to talk to Hallinan again. She hadn't got rid of it all. There was still some poison left inside her, something cold and chunky that would melt before Mr. Hallinan's warmth.

She dressed, impatiently brewed some coffee, and left the house. Down Copperbeech Road, past the Moncrieff house where Daisy and her stuffy husband Fred were busily emptying the ashtrays of the night before, down to Melon Hill and up the gentle slope to the split-level at the top.

Mr. Hallinan came to the door in a blue checked dressing gown. He looked slightly seedy, almost overhung, Lys thought. His dark eyes had puffy lids and a light stubble sprinkled his cheeks.

"Yes, Mrs. Erwin?"

"Oh—good morning, Mr. Hallinan. I—I came to see you. I hope I didn't disturb you—that is—"

"Quite all right, Mrs. Erwin." Instantly she was at ease. "But I'm afraid I'm really extremely tired after last night, and I fear I shouldn't be very good company just now."

"But you said you'd talk to me alone today. And—oh, there's so much more I want to tell you!"

A shadow of feeling—*pain? fear?* Lys wondered—crossed his face. "No," he said hastily. "No more—not just yet. I'll have to rest today. Would you mind coming back—well, say Wednesday?"

"Certainly, Mr. Hallinan. I wouldn't want to disturb you."

She turned away and started down the hill, thinking: *he had too much of our troubles last night. He soaked them all up like a sponge, and today he's going to digest them—*

Oh, what am I thinking?

She reached the foot of the hill, brushed a couple of tears from her eyes, and walked home rapidly, feeling the October chill whistling around her.

And so the pattern of life in New Brewster developed. For the six weeks before his death, Mr. Hallinan was a fixture at any important community gathering, always dressed impeccably, always ready with his cheerful smile, always uncannily able to draw forth whatever secret hungers and terrors lurked in his neighbors' souls.

And invariably Mr. Hallinan would be unapproachable the day after these gatherings, would mildly but firmly turn away any callers. What he did, alone in the house on Melon Hill, no one knew. As the days passed, it oc-

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curred to all that no one knew much of anything about Mr. Hallinan. He knew *them* all right, knew the one night of adultery twenty years before that still racked Daisy Moncrieff, knew the acid pain that seared Dudley Heyer, the cold envy glittering in Martha Weede, the frustration and loneliness of Lys Erwin, her husband's shy anger at his own cuckoldry—he knew these things and many more, but none of them knew more of him than his name.

Still, he warmed their lives and took from them the burden of their griefs. If he chose to keep his own life hidden, they said, that was his privilege.

He took walks every day, through still-wooded New Brewster, and would wave and smile to the children, who would wave and smile back. Occasionally he would stop, chat with a sulking child, then move on, tall, erect, walking with a jaunty stride.

He was never known to set foot in either of New Brewster's two churches. Once Lora Harker, a mainstay of the New Brewster Presbyterian Church, took him to task for this at a dull dinner party given by the Weedes.

But Mr. Hallinan smiled mildly and said, "Some of us feel the need. Others do not."

And that ended the discussion.

Toward the end of November a few members of the community experienced an abrupt reversal of their feelings about Mr. Hallinan—weary, perhaps, of his constant empathy for their woes. The change in spirit was spearheaded by Dudley Heyer, Carl Weede, and several of the other men.

"I'm getting not to trust that guy," Heyer said. He knocked dottle vehemently from his pipe. "Always hanging around soaking up gossip, pulling out dirt—and what the hell for? What does *he* get out of it?"

"Maybe he's practising to be a saint," Carl Weede remarked quietly. "Self-abnegation. The Buddhist Eightfold Path."

"The women all swear by him," said Leslie Erwin. "Lys hasn't been the same since he came here."

"I'll say she hasn't," said Aiken Muir wryly, and all of the men, even Erwin, laughed, getting the sharp thrust.

"All I know is I'm tired of having a father-confessor in our midst," Heyer said. "I think he's got a motive back of all his goody-goody warmness. When he's through pumping us he's going to write a book that'll put New Brewster on the map but good."

"You always suspect people of writing books," Muir said. *"Oh, that mine enemy would write a book . . . !"*

"Well, whatever his motives I'm getting annoyed. And that's why he hasn't been invited to the party we're giving on Monday night." Heyer glared at Fred Moncrieff

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as if expecting some dispute. "I've spoken to my wife about it, and she agrees. Just this once, dear Mr. Hallinan stays home."

It was strangely cold at the Heyers' party that Monday night. The usual people were there, all but Mr. Hallinan. The party was not a success. Some, unaware that Mr. Hallinan had not been invited, waited expectantly for the chance to talk to him, and managed to leave early when they discovered he was not to be there.

"We should have invited him," Ruth Heyer said after the last guest had left.

Heyer shook his head. "No. I'm glad we didn't."

"But that poor man, all alone on the hill while the bunch of us were here, cut off from us. You don't think he'll get insulted, do you? I mean, and cut us from now on?"

"I don't care," Heyer said, scowling.

His attitude of mistrust toward Mr. Hallinan spread through the community. First the Muirs, then the Harkers, failed to invite him to gatherings of theirs. He still took his usual afternoon walks, and those who met him observed a slightly strained expression on his face, though he still smiled gently and chatted easily enough, and made no bitter comments.

And on December 3, a Wednesday, Rov Heyer, age 10, and Philip Moncrieff, age 9, set upon Lonny Dewitt, age 9, just outside the New Brewster Public School, just before Mr. Hallinan turned down the school lane on his stroll.

Lonny was a strange, silent boy, the despair of his parents and the bane of his classmates. He kept to himself, said little, nudged into corners and stayed there. People clucked their tongues when they saw him in the street.

Roy Heyer and Philip Moncrieff made up their minds they were going to make Lonny Dewitt say something, or else.

It was *or else*. They pummeled him and kicked him for a few minutes; then, seeing Mr. Hallinan approaching, they ran, leaving him weeping silently on the flagstone steps outside the empty school.

Lonny looked up as the tall man drew near.

"They've been hitting you, haven't they? I see them running away now."

Lonny continued to cry. He was thinking, *There's something funny about this man. But he wants to help me. He wants to be kind to me.*

"You're Lonny Dewitt, I think. Why are you crying? Come, Lonny, stop crying! They didn't hurt you that much."

They didn't, Lonny said silently. *I like to cry.*

Mr. Hallinan was smiling cheerfully. "Tell me all about it. Some-

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thing's bothering you, isn't it? Something big, that makes you feel all lumpy and sad inside. Tell me about it, Lonny, and maybe it'll go away." He took the boy's small cold hands in his own, and squeezed them.

"Don't want to talk," Lonny said.

"But I'm a friend. I want to help you."

Lonny peered close and saw suddenly that the tall man told the truth. He wanted to help Lonny. More than that: he *had* to help Lonny. Desperately. He was pleading. "Tell me what's troubling you," Mr. Hallinan said again.

OK, Lonny thought. *I'll tell you.*

And he lifted the floodgates. Nine years of repression and torment came rolling out in one roaring burst.

I'm alone and they hate me because I do things in my head and they never understood and they think I'm queer and they hate me I see them looking funny at me and they think funny things about me because I want to talk to them with my mind and they can only hear words and I hate them hate them hate hate hate—

Lonny stopped suddenly. He had let it all out, and now he felt better, cleansed of the poison he'd been carrying in him for years. But Mr. Hallinan looked funny. He was pale and white-faced, and he was staggering.

In alarm, Lonny extended his mind to the tall man. And got:

Too much. Much too much. Should never have gone near the boy. But the older ones wouldn't let me.

Irony: the compulsive empath overloaded and burned out by a compulsive sender who'd been bottled up.

. . . like grabbing a high-voltage wire . . .

. . . he was a sender, I was a receiver, but he was too strong . . .

And four last bitter words: *I . . . was . . . a . . . leech. . . .*

"Please, Mr. Hallinan," Lonny said out loud. "Don't get sick. I want to tell you some more. Please, Mr. Hallinan."

Silence.

Lonny picked up a final lingering wordlessness, and knew he had found and lost the first one like himself. Mr. Hallinan's eyes closed and he fell forward on his face in the street. Lonny realized that it was over, that he and the people of New Brewster would never talk to Mr. Hallinan again. But just to make sure he bent and took Mr. Hallinan's limp wrist.

He let go quickly. The wrist was like a lump of ice. *Cold*—burningly cold. Lonnie stared at the dead man for a moment or two.

"Why, it's dear Mr. Hallinan," a female voice said. "Is he—"

And feeling the loneliness return, Lonny began to cry softly again.

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The only authenticated instance of Boucher ESP (or perhaps EESP) occurred when I last wrote an introduction to an Evelyn E. Smith story and described the author as "a delightful and witty brunette." The statement was, as of that date, correct; but Miss Smith points out that I had never seen her except as a blonde. At about this period of tonsorial transition (which suits my ungentlemanly preferences), Miss Smith briefly abandoned the composition of s.f. and crossword puzzles for a fling at "true" confessions. Something of the confessional style and mood lingered with her after her return to our field, resulting in this poignant tale of love remote in time and space.

Outcast of Mars

by EVELYN E. SMITH

PAW'S EYES SLITTED INTO A MASK of pure meanness. "Now, I want all you young'uns to understand this," he rasped. "Just because we've had to come live on Mars don't mean we got to forget we're people."

"No, Paw," I, being oldest, quavered for the whole family. Fifteen of us, there were. One for every year Paw and Maw had been married, up to and including the first. Paw and Maw had been mighty impetuous, and Maw's Paw had been a mighty good shot.

Maw was dead now—God rest her soul—and now we'd come to Mars, on account of because Paw couldn't get no work on Earth. Bone-lazy, they said he was, and shiftless, and drank too much.

And they were right. They don't come no bone-lazier or shiftlesser than Paw, while as for liquor, he can outdrink any life-form in the Galaxy, though I as says it shouldn't, being his own daughter. Paw couldn't be sure about the other fourteen kids, but he was pretty sure about me, because I was the reason him and Maw had gone and gotten theirselves married up.

Later on, Maw had broadened her horizons, and it was anyone's guess who had fathered the other fourteen. Leastways, that's what Paw always said, though it seemed

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to me he maybe should have gotten a little evidence afore he went and pushed her in the well. That was another reason we had to pull up stakes and head for Mars. Water wasn't no good any more.

"And you, Little-Liza Jane," Paw went on, "I don't want you cavortin' round with any of them Martian hotshots. Remember, we're people, so it just naturally stands to reason we're better than what they are."

"Yes, Paw," I promised. "I'll remember."

"They may be smarter than we-uns are," he went on; "they may be cleaner than we-uns are; they may be more advanced techno—techno—"

"Technologically," little Seymour piped up.

Crack! Paw give him a belt across the mouth. "That'll learn you to finish my words for me," he snarled.

At that the kids started in to create a ruckus and Paw had to clobber a few more of them afore they'd shut up. When all was quiet, except for Seymour's blubbering—and there was no use a-waiting for that to stop because Seymour was a mighty powerful blubberer and could go on for days when he was in good form—Paw went on: "I don't care what they are; they're not people. And that means they're not good enough for ussen. So I don't want to catch you lettin' any of them Martian fellers hangin' round you, Little-Liza Jane. Hear?"

"Aw, shucks, Paw," I said, "what would a Martian feller see in me?"

I was sixteen that year and pretty as a picture, with long yellow hair hanging clear down to my ankles and eyes as blue and limpid as fresh mountain pools sparkling in the early spring sunlight. But I'd worn the same old flour sack for five seasons already, and I hadn't but one shoe—which I wore around my neck on a string. Maw had left it to me. It was all of hers I had.

What would the Martian boys see in the likes of me? Particularly since they were birds, anyways.

"Oh, I dunno," Paw said, looking at me in a way a Paw hadn't ought to look at his daughter; "you're developin' into a woman, Little-Liza Jane."

"So what would they see in a woman?" I asked. "I ain't got no feathers. I ain't got no beak. I ain't no pretty color like them. They wouldn't see nothin' in me."

"So long as you don't see nothin' in them. You take after your Maw, Little-Liza Jane, and she was pretty flighty."

"No, Paw," I said bravely, "you can trust me. I won't have nothin' to do with no Martian boy nohow. Because the feller I aim to go with—the man who's a-goin' to be the father of my children and maybe even, if you'd just keep up with your target practice, my husband

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—he's got to be real people. Otherwise I ain't a-fixin' to have nothin' to do with him."

"Daughter," Paw said, putting his hand on my shoulder, "I'm proud of you. You're a true Kallikak!"

"Aw, shucks, Paw," I said, embarrassed-like, because it wasn't often I got a kind word from him, "'twarn't nothin'."

"'Twarn't nothin', you say!" Wham! And he give me a good crack across the kisser. "That'll teach you to call your Paw's kind words nothin'."

I got right lonesome after we-all'd been on Mars a spell. There was a fair-to-middling-sized Martian city nearabouts, but there weren't many people away out there on the edge of the desert, excepting for some other miners, like Paw. When the Martians needed some hand-mining done, they had to send down to Earth for labor, because no self-respecting Martian would do that kind of work. And only the dregs from Earth would come, because no self-respecting Earthmen would come to Mars to do work no self-respecting Martian wouldn't do.

The other miners had no families. Families was one of the big reasons most of them had come out to Mars. Getting away from them, I mean. And they were old, like Paw—thirty-five or so.

Oh, sure, from time to time they'd catch hold of me and paw me, but—oh—it wasn't the same as being pawed by a fellow closer to your own age.

And I'd watch the Martian boys and girls fly past Saturday nights on their way to the Ulululu dance, wing in wing, in a dazzling blur of iridescent feathers, and I'd choke back my tears and say bravely to myself, "I'm glad I'm real people."

But deep down inside my heart of hearts I wished I was a bird.

There was a little trouble about my schooling, because Martian law says a kid got to go to school until he's thirty. The Martian life span is longer than ours you know, and Martians mature considerable later. But red-tape is red-tape, and, on Mars or on Earth, the law just don't take account of little things like that.

I was kind of glad to go to school, though, because I hadn't had much schooling on Earth—Paw didn't hold with book-learning—and I hankered after an education. And I also kind of hankered to be with kids my own age, birds or not.

But I felt so out of things. I was so different from the other kids. Oh, they were nice enough to me and let me make pens out of their feathers, seeing as I didn't have none of my own, but I kept on feeling I just didn't belong.

Finally I was let to quit school. They fixed up some kind of rub-

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bishy excuse—mental deficiency, something silly like that—so's I wouldn't have to go.

So I stayed home all day and took care of the shack and the kids for Paw. Pushing buttons, watching the tri-dis, arguing with them dumb Martian robots about the right way to clean the house—oh, it was a hard life, particularly for a nubile young female like me.

But we had our recreations. And one night I was trudging home early from the saloon. The Martians had fixed up a real saloon for us'uns, with all kinds of liquor and soft drinks imported from Earth and caviar and stuff like that. Nobody was ever going to say they didn't treat their hired help real nice, even if the help was only people.

The Martians sort of looked down on people because, not being people, they didn't understand people were better than they were. Like Paw always said, what else could you expect from a pack of ignorant birds?

I was coming home early on account of because Paw had gotten real nasty, even for him. He'd been drinking too much corn liquor—I stick to pawpaw juice myself because I'm temperance—and he was getting that old-fashioned look in his eyes that meant incest.

"Don't paw me, Paw," I yelled, "or I'll slug you with this here bottle of pawpaw juice." Because I knew it was all right for a sweet, innocent young girl to clobber her old man if it was in defense of her honor.

Paw kept on pawing, and so I had to sock him with the pawpaw bottle. He went out like a light.

"Paw, Paw, speak to me!" I yelled, shaking the old buzzard. "I'm plumb sorry I had to conk you with the pawpaw bottle, but you hadn't ought to have been pawin' me, Paw. *Paw!*"

But he lay there still and cold. I figured he was dead. When the Martians found out, they would deport me from Mars on account of because I wasn't no use to them. I guessed I just wasn't no use to nobody. Nobody wanted me. . . . Except men.

"He ain't dead," kindly Old Zeke, one of the miners, told me. "Just out cold. You better trudge on home, Little-Liza Jane, and, when your Paw comes to, we'll get him so likkered up that, by the end of the evenin', he won't know what hit him."

And, giving me a friendly pat upon the tailfeathers, he flang me out into the night.

So there I was, trudging home through the desert, and crying as if my heart was like to bust, because my own Paw had treated me so disrespectful, and also because the sand hurt my foot so. It didn't hurt the other foot, because I was wearing Maw's shoe on it. I knew Maw would have wanted it that way.

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Suddenly I heard a whirring sound, and a voice from the air called, "Hiya, chick. How about a lift?"

I looked up—and it was Pp'eepi Rrrr-eep. He'd been president of the senior class at the Martian school I'd gone to for a piece. He was so handsome and so fluffy and so iridescent. All the Martian girls had been just plain crazy about him.

"Why, if it isn't Little-Liza Jane Kallikak!" he cried.

He remembered me! He even knew my name! I hadn't dreamed he'd noticed little old me in the middle of all them gorgeous Martian girls. But he had—he had—oh, he had!

I couldn't think of nothing to say to him, so I just dug my bare toes in the sand and giggled.

"Little-Liza Jane," he asked, "why did you-all leave school?"

"I got expelled," I said shyly. "Did you-all notice I was gone?"

"Notice?" he said. "I've been searchin' in all the perches and rootin' round all the roosts, a-lookin' for you, Little-Liza Jane. Gal, you have made an indelible impression upon my heart—which is to say, you sure send me, kid."

"Clare to goodness," I gasped, my heart going pit-a-pat.

"You know why I love you, Little-Liza Jane?" he breathed, coming closer and closer to me.

"No, I reckon I don't, Pp'eepi Rrrr-eep," I said, my heart going pat-a-pit as I gazed into his eyes.

"It's because you're different, Little-Liza Jane."

Me, little old ordinary me, different? Nobody had ever spoke so pretty to me before in all my borned days. I could have cried with the joy of it, and I did. I bust right out crying with the joy of it.

"Don't you cry, Little-Liza Jane," he said. "I am here." And he sure was, right close, too.

And there we were alone in the desert with the magic of the Martian night all around us and them there two moons—which, as everybody knows, are twice as dangerous as one—hanging up there in the sky so pretty and so romantical-looking. Madness swept over me and I . . . gave myself to Pp'eepi Rrrr-eeep. . . .

And then it was all over, and I was laying there on the hot desert sand, crying and crying and crying. "Oh, Pp'eepi Rrrr-eep," I sobbed, "how could you-all have gone and done a thing like this to poor little me?"

"I'm wondering that myself, gal," he said. "And I'm sure my biology professor up at the university will be real interested too. . . . Of course," he went on pensive-like, "your terrestrial legends do speak of Leda and the swan."

"Iffen you're speakin' of Leda Proust who lived over to the next county," I snuffled, as I sat up, "you got the story all wrong.

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'Twarnt no swan—'twas Farmer LaGrange's bull, and Farmer LaGrange was right peeved, because it was his prize stud—"

"No, you've got it mixed up, Little-Liza Jane," Pp'eepi Rrrr-eep said. "You're a-thinkin' of Europa."

"I said 'twas over to the next county, didn't I?" I told him. "That's the name of the next county—Europa. Europe we call it in our part of the country. . . . Oh, Pp'eepi Rrrr-eep," and I cried some more, "leave us not discuss geography at a moment like this. What are we-all a-goin' to do?" I yelled, the tears streaming down my pretty face in bucketfuls. "Iffen Paw ever finds out I been havin' an affair with a Martian boy, he'll kill me for sure."

"My paw ain't a-goin' to crow with joy, neither, Little-Liza Jane. He always says people are all right in their place, but there's no call for ussen to mix with 'em social-like. 'Would you like your daughter to marry a human?' he keeps a-askin', and I guess he'd feel the same way about a son."

I started to cry even louder.

"But I will tell him that honor demands you and me got to get ourselves hitched right off, and he's bound to see reason, 'cause us Martians are real gone on honor. So, do not fear, Little-Liza Jane, I will return and carry you off to a love-nest built for two."

So saying, he beat his wings and was off into the wild red yonder. Martian skies being red, you know.

And there I was once more all alone in the desert. But it wasn't a desert no more. There were flowers and trees and stuff all around me. I had cried so durn much I had irrigated the land and turned it into a right pretty oasis.

All that was quite a spell ago, and Pp'eepi Rrrr-eeep still hasn't showed up. But I keep on waiting and hoping and hoping and waiting. Sometimes I wait more, and sometimes I hope more, but it all evens out at the end.

I know one fine day he's a-going to come back to me. He's just got to.

Because soon my secret will be a secret no longer. This morning I found out that I couldn't keep the knowledge of my illicit love from Paw no more. It's only a matter of time afore he gets to know I loved not wisely but too well—and a Martian at that.

Already he's been asking why I've been setting here all day. And I pray and hope that Pp'eepi Rrrr-eep will come back today. Iffen he don't, it sure as heck is a-going to be curtains for poor Little-Liza Jane.

Because this morning I went and laid me an egg.

And, as it has been with we women since love first plundered the planets, I sit here abandoned, brooding over the sweet souvenir of our passion.

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READERS' BOOK SERVICE

Below is a list of many of the most important science fiction books of the past year which you may no order postpaid through F&SF. In addition, you may order any hard-cover book reviewed in this magazi during the past year. (Sorry, but we cannot offer this service on paper-bound books.)

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Ted Cogswell, English professor, folksinger and master of light fantasy paradox, turns to a different vein in this short chill tale of terror, in which a horror of today's civilization meets, justly, an older evil.

You Know Willie

by THEODORE R. COGSWELL

IN THE OLD DAYS THERE WOULDN'T have been any fuss about Willie McCracken shooting a Negro, but these weren't the old days. The judge sat sweating, listening to the voice from the state capital that roared through the telephone receiver.

"But you can't hang no white man for shooting no nigger!"

"Who said anything about hanging?" said the voice impatiently. "I want it to look good, that's all. So don't make it any half hour job—take two weeks if you have to."

The judge obediently took two weeks. There was a long parade of witnesses for the defense and an equally long one for the prosecution, and through it all the jury, having been duly instructed beforehand, sat gravely, happy for a respite from the hot sun and fields—and the cash money that was accruing to each of them at the rate of three dollars a day. A bright young man was down from the capital to oversee all major matters, and as a result, the trial of Willie McCracken was a model of juridical propriety.

The prosecution made as strong a case against Willie as it could without bringing in such prejudicial evidence as that the little garage the dead man had opened after he came back from Korea had been taking business away from the one Willie ran at an alarming rate, or that it was common knowledge that Willie was the Thrice High Warlock of the local chapter of The Knights of the Flaming Sword and in his official capacity had given the deceased one week to get out of town or else.

There were two important witnesses. One was very old and very black, the other wasn't quite as young as she used to be but she was white. The first could technically be classed as a witch—

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though there was another and more sonorous name for what she was in the forgotten tribal language she used on ritual occasions —but contrary to the ancient injunction, she had not only been permitted to live, but to flourish in a modest fashion. There were few in the courtroom who had not at one time or another made secret use of Aunt Hattie's services. And although most of the calls had been for relatively harmless love potions or protective amulets, there were enough who had called with darker things in mind to cause her to be treated with unusual respect.

Aunt Hattie was the town's oldest inhabitant—legend had it that she was already a grown woman when Lincoln larcenously freed the slaves—and the deceased had been her only living blood relative.

Having been duly sworn, she testified that the defendant, Willie McCracken, had come to her cabin just as she was getting supper, asked for the deceased, and then shot him between the eyes when he came to the door.

She was followed by Willie's wife, a plumpish little blonde in an over-tight dress who was obviously enjoying all the attention she was getting. She in turn swore that Willie had been home in bed with her where he belonged at the time in question. From the expressions on the jurymen's faces, it was obvious that they were thinking that if he hadn't been, he was a darned fool.

There were eight Knights of the Flaming Sword sitting around the table in Willie's kitchen. Willie pulled a jug from the floor beside him, took a long swallow, and wiped his mouth nervously with the hairy back of his hand. He looked up at the battered alarm clock on the shelf over the sink and then lifted the jug again. When he set it down Pete Martin reached over and grabbed it.

"Buck up, Willie boy," he said as he shook the container to see how much was left in it. "Ain't nobody going to get at you with us here."

Willie shivered. "You ain't seen her squatting out under that cottonwood every night like I have." He reached out for the jug but Martin laughed and pulled it out of reach.

"You lay off that corn and you won't be seeing Aunt Hattie every time you turn around. The way you've been hitting the stuff since the trial it's a wonder you ain't picking snakes up off the table by now."

"I seen her, I tell you," said Willie sullenly. "Six nights running now I seen her plain as day just sitting out under that tree waiting for the moon to get full." He reached for the jug again but Martin pushed his hand away.

"You've had enough. Now you

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just sit there quiet like while I talk some sense. Aunt Hattie's dead and Jackson's dead and they're both safe six foot under. I don't blame you for getting your wind up after what she yelled in the courtroom afore she keeled over, but just remember that there ain't no nigger the Knights can't take care of, dead or alive. Now you go upstairs and get yourself a little shut-eye. You're plumb beat. I don't think you've had six hours good sleep since the finish of the trial. You don't notice Winnie Mae losing any rest, do you?"

Willie kneaded his bald scalp with thick fingers. "Couldn't sleep," he said hoarsely. "Not with her out there. She said he'd come back first full moon rise and every night it's been getting rounder and rounder."

"He comes back, we'll fix him for you, Willie," said Martin in a soothing voice. "Now you do like I said. Moon won't be up for a good two hours yet. You go get a little sleep and we'll call you in plenty of time."

Willie hesitated and then got to his feet and lumbered up the stairs. He was so tired he staggered as he walked. When he got into the dark bedroom he pulled off his clothes and threw himself down on the brass bed beside Winnie Mae. He tried to keep awake but he couldn't. In a moment his heavy snores were blending with her light delicate ones.

The moonlight was strong and bright in the room when Willie woke. They hadn't called him! From the kitchen below he heard a rumble of voices and then drunken laughter. Slowly, as if hypnotized, he swung his fat legs over the side of the bed and stumbled to the window. He tried to keep from looking but he couldn't. She would be there, squatting beneath the old cottonwood, a shriveled little black mummy that waited . . . waited . . . waited . . .

Willie dug his knuckles suddenly into his eyes, rubbed hard, and then looked again. There was nothing! Nothing where the thick old trunk met the ground but a dusty clump of crab grass. He stood trembling, staring down at the refuse-littered yard as if it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. There was something healing in the calm flood of moonlight. The hard knot he had been carrying inside his head dissolved and he felt strong and young again. He wanted to shout, to caper around the room.

Winne Mae mumbled in her sleep and he turned to look at her. Her thin cotton nightgown was bunched up under her arms and she lay, legs astraddle, her plump body gleaming whitely in the moonlight. She whimpered as she pulled herself up out of her slumber and then closed her arms around the heavy body that was pressing down on her.

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"Remember me," he whispered, "I'm Willie. You know Willie."

She giggled and pulled him tighter against her. Her breath began to come faster and her fingers made little cat clawings on his back. As she squirmed under him her hands crept higher, over his shoulders, up his neck . . .

There was a sudden explosion under him and a caterwauling scream of sheer horror. Willie jerked back as her nails raked across his face, and then he felt a sudden stabbing agony as she jabbed up with her knee. He staggered away from the bed, his hands cupped over his bleeding face.

His hands! Time slid to a nightmarish stop as his finger tips sent a message pulsing down through nerve endings that his bald scalp had somehow sprouted a thick mop of kinky hair. He jerked his hands down and held them cupped before him. The fresh blood was black in the moonlight, and not only the blood. He spun toward the cracked mirror and saw himself for the first time. The flabby body with its sagging belly was gone. In its place was that of a dark-skinned stranger . . . but not a stranger.

His fingers crept across his forehead looking for the small red bullet hole that was no longer there.

And then time started to rush forward again. Winnie Mae's screaming went on and on and there was a rushing of heavy feet up the stairs from the kitchen.

He tried to explain but there was a new softness to his speech that put the lie to his stumbling words. When the door burst open he stood for a moment, hands stretched out in supplication.

"No," he whimpered. "I'm Willie. You know Willie."

As they came slowly out of the shadows he broke. He took one slow step backwards, and then two, and then when he felt the low sill press against his calves, turned and dove out the window onto the sloping roof. When he got to the ground he tried again to explain but somebody remembered his gun.

Willie as he had been would have been run to ground within the mile, but his new lithe body carried him effortlessly through the night. If it hadn't been for the dogs he might have got away.

Somebody had a deck of cards and they all drew. Pete Martin was low man so he had to go back after the gasoline.

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In between her warmly awaited novelets of The People, Zenna Henderson writes short stories, as variedly memorable as the grim Walking Aunt Daid *(F&SF, July, 1955), the realistic* You Know What, Teacher? (ELLERY QUEEN'S AWARDS: NINTH SERIES), *and the glowing* Anything Box *(F&SF, October, 1956). In this her latest short, Teacher Henderson teaches us some forgotten truths about fairy tales . . . and about the living of life.*

Turn the Page

by ZENNA HENDERSON

WHEN I WAS IN THE FIRST GRADE, my teacher was magic. Oh, I know! Everyone thinks that his first teacher is something special. It's practically a convention that all little boys fall in love with her and that all little girls imitate her and that both believe her the Alpha and Omega of wisdom—but *my* teacher was really magic.

We all felt it the first day when finally the last anxious parent was shooed reluctantly out the door and we sat stiff and uneasy in our hard, unfriendly chairs and stared across our tightly clasped hands at Miss Ebo, feeling truly that we were on the edge of something strange and wonderful, but more wonderful than strange. Tears dried on the face of our weeper as we waited in that moment that trembled like a raindrop before it splinters into rainbows.

"Let's *be* something!" Miss Ebo whispered. "Let's be birds."

And we were! We were! *Real birds!* We fluttered and sang and flitted from chair to chair all around the room. We prinked and preened and smoothed our heads along the brightness of feathers and learned in those moments the fierce throbbing restlessness of birds, the feathery hushing quietness of sleeping wings. *And there was one of us that beat endlessly at the closed windows, scattering feathers, shaking the glass, straining for the open sky.*

Then we were children again, wiggling with remembered delight, exchanging pleased smiles, feeling that maybe school wasn't all fright and strangeness after all.

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And with a precocious sort of knowledge, we wordlessly pledged our mutual silence about our miracle.

This first day set the pace for us. We were, at different times, almost every creature imaginable, learning of them, and how they fitted into the world and how they touched onto our segment of the world, until we saw fellow creatures wherever we looked. *But there was one of us who set himself against the lessons* and ground his heel viciously down on the iridescence of a green June-bug that blundered into our room one afternoon. The rest of us looked at Miss Ebo, hoping in our horror for some sort of cosmic blast from her. Her eyes were big and knowing—and a little sad. We turned back to our work, tasting for the first time a little of the sorrow for those who stubbornly shut their eyes against the sun and still curse the darkness.

And soon the stories started. Other children *heard* about Red Riding Hood and the Wolf and maybe played the parts, but we took turns at *being* Red Riding Hood and the Wolf. Individually we tasted the terror of the pursued—the sometimes delightfully delicious terror of the pursued—and we knew the blood lust and endless drive of the pursuer—the hot pulses leaping in our veins, the irresistible compulsion of hunger-never-satiated that pulled us along the shadowy forest trails.

And when we were Red Riding Hood, we knew under our terror and despair that help would come—*had* to come when we turned the page, *because it was written that way*. If we were the wolf, we knew that death waited at the end of our hunger; we leaped as compulsively to that death as we did to our feeding. As the mother and grandmother, we knew the sorrow of letting our children go, and the helpless waiting for them to find the dangers and die of them or live through them, but always, always, were we the pursuer or the pursued, the waiter or the active one, we knew we had only to turn the page and finally live happily ever after, *because it was written that way!* And we found out that after you have once been the pursuer, the pursued and the watcher, you can never again be only the pursuer or the pursued or the watcher. Ever after you are a little of each of them.

We learned and learned in our first grade, but sometimes we had to stop our real learning and learn what was expected of us. Those were the shallow days.

We knew the shallow days when they arrived because Miss Ebo met us at the door, brightly smiling, cheerily speaking, but with her lovely dark eyes quiet and uncommunicative. We left the door ajar and set ourselves to routine

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tasks. We read and wrote and worked with our numbers, covering all we had slighted in the magic days before—a model class, learning neat little lessons, carefully catching up with the other first grades. Sometimes we even had visitors to smile at our industry, or the supervisor to come in and sharply twitch a picture to more exact line on the bulletin board, fold her lips in frustration and make some short-tempered note in her little green book before she left us, turning her stiff white smile on briefly for our benefit. And, at day's end, we sighed with weariness of soul and burst out of class with all the unused enthusiasm of the day, hoping that tomorrow would be magic again. And it usually was.

The door would swing shut with a pleased little chuckling cluck and we would lift our questioning faces to Miss Ebo—or the Witch or the Princess or the Fairy Godmother—and plunge into another story as into a sparkling sea.

As Cinderella, we labored in the ashes of the fireplace and of lonely isolation and of labor without love. We wept tears of hopeless longing as we watched the semblance of joy and happiness leave us behind, weeping for it even though we knew too well the ugliness straining under it—the sharp bones of hatefulness jabbing at scarlet satin and misty tulle. Cinderella's miracle came to us and we made our loveliness from commonplace things and learned that happiness often has a midnight chiming so that it won't leak bleakly into a watery dawn and, finally, that no matter how fast we run, we leave a part of us behind, and by that part of us, joy comes when we turn the page and we finally live happily ever after, *because it is written that way.*

With Chicken Little, we cowered under the falling of our sky. We believed implicitly in our own little eye and our own little ear and the aching of our own little tail where the sky had bruised us. Not content with panicking ourselves with the small falling, we told the whole world repeatedly and at great length that the sky was falling for everyone because it fell for us. And when the Fox promised help and hope and strength, we followed him and let our bones be splintered in the noisome darkness of fear and ignorance.

And, as the Fox, we crunched with unholy glee the bones of little fools who shut themselves in their own tiny prisons and followed fear into death rather than take a larger look at the sky. And we found them delicious and insidious.

Mrs. Thompson came down to see Miss Ebo after Chicken Little. There must be some reason why Jackie was having nightmares—maybe something at school?

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And Miss Ebo had to soothe her with all sorts of little Educational Psychology platitudes because she couldn't tell her that Jackie just wouldn't come out of the Fox's den even after his bones were scrunched to powder. He was afraid of a wide sky and always would be.

So the next day we all went into the darkness of caves and were little blind fish. We were bats that used their ears for eyes. We were small shining things that seemed to have no life but grew into beauty and had the wisdom to stop when they reached the angles of perfection. So Jackie chose to be one of those and he didn't learn with us any more except on our shallow days. He loved shallow days. The other times he grew to limited perfection in his darkness.

And there was one of us who longed to follow the Fox forever. Every day his eyes would hesitate on Miss Ebo's face, but every day the quietness of her mouth told him that the Fox should not come back into our learning. And his eyes would drop and his fingers would pluck anxiously at one another.

The year went on and we were princesses leaning from towers, drawing love to us on shining extensions of ourselves, feeling the weight and pain of love along with its shiningness as the prince climbed Rapunzel's golden hair. We, as Rapunzel, betrayed ourselves to evil. We were cast into the wilderness, we bought our way back into happiness by our tears of mingled joy and sorrow. And—as the witch—we were evil, hoarding treasures to ourselves, trying to hold unchanged things that had to change. We were the one who destroyed loveliness when it had to be shared, who blinded maliciously, only to find that all loveliness, all delight, went with the sight we destroyed.

And then we learned more. We were the greedy woman. We wanted a house, a castle, a palace—power beyond power, beyond power, until we wanted to meddle with the workings of the universe. And then we had to huddle back on the dilapidated steps of the old shack with nothing again, nothing in our lax hands, because we reached for too much.

But then we were her husband, too, who gave in and gave in against his better judgment, against his desires, but always backing away from a *no* until he sat there, too, with empty hands, staring at the nothing he must share. And he had never had anything at all because he had never asked for it. It was a strange, hard lesson and we studied it again and again until one of us was stranded in greed, another in apathy and one of us almost knew the right answer.

But magic can't last. That was

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our final, and my hardest, bitterest, lesson. One day Miss Ebo wasn't there. She'd gone away, they said. She wouldn't be back. I remember how my heart tightened and burned coldly inside me when I heard. And shallow day followed shallow day and I watched, terrified, the memory of Miss Ebo dying out of the other kids' eyes.

Then one afternoon I saw her again, thin and white, blown against the playground fence like a forgotten leaf of last autumn. Her russetty dress fluttered in the cold wind and the flick of her pale fingers called me from clear across the playground. I pressed my face close against the wire mesh, trying to cry against her waist, my fingers reaching hungrily through to her.

My voice was hardly louder than the whisper of dry leaves across a path. "Miss Ebo! Miss Ebo! Come back!"

"You haven't forgotten." Her answer lost itself on the wind. "Remember. Always remember. Remember the whole of the truth. Truth has so many sides, evil and good, that if you cling to just one, it may make it a lie." The wind freshened and she fluttered with it, clinging to the wire. "Remember, turn the page. Everyone *will* finally live happily ever after, *because that's the way it's written!*"

My eyes blurred with tears and before I could knuckle them dry, she was gone.

"Crybaby!" The taunt stung me as we lined up to go back indoors.

"I saw her!" I cried. "I saw Miss Ebo!"

"Miss Ebo?" Blank eyes stared into mine. There was a sudden flicker way back behind seeing, but it died. "Crybaby!"

Oh, I know that no one believes in fairy tales any more. They're for children. Well, who better to teach than children that good must ultimately triumph? Fairy tale ending—they lived happily ever after! *But it is written that way!* The marriage of bravery and beauty—tasks accomplished, peril surmounted, evil put down, captives freed, enchantments broken, humanity emerging from the forms of beasts, giants slain, wrongs righted, joy coming in the morning after the night of weeping. The lessons are all there. They're told over and over and over, but we let them slip and we sigh for our childhood days, not seeing that we shed the truth as we shed our deciduous teeth.

I never saw Miss Ebo again, but I saw my first grade again, those who survived to our twenty-fifth anniversary. At first I thought I wouldn't go, but most sorrow can be set aside for an evening, even the sorrow attendant on finding how easily happiness is lost when it depends on a single factor. I looked around at those who had

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come, but I saw in them only the tattered remnants of Miss Ebo's teachings.

Here was the girl who so delighted in the terror of being pursued that she still fled along dark paths, though no danger followed. Here was our winged one still beating his wings against the invisible glass. Here was our pursuer, the blood lust in his eyes altered to a lust for power that was just as compulsive, just as inevitably fatal as the old pursuing evil.

Here was our terror-stricken Chicken Little, his drawn face, his restless, bitten nails, betraying his eternal running away from the terror he sowed behind himself, looking for the Fox, any Fox, with glib, comforting promises. And there, serene, was the one who learned to balance between asking too much and too little—who controlled his desires instead of letting them control him. There was the one, too, who had sorrowed and wept but who was now coming into her kingdom of children.

But these last two were strangers—as I was—in this wistful gathering of people who were trying to turn back twenty-five years. I sat through the evening, trying to trace in the masks around me the bright spirits that had run with me into Miss Ebo's enchantment. I looked for Jackie. I asked for Jackie. He was hidden away in some protected place, eternally being his dark shining things, afraid —too afraid—of even shallowness ever to walk in the light again.

There were speeches. There was laughter. There was clowning. But always the underlying strain, the rebellion, the silent crying out, the fear and mistrust.

They asked me to talk.

I stood, leaning against the teacher's desk, and looked down into the carefully empty faces.

"You have forgotten," I said. "You have all forgotten Miss Ebo."

"Miss Ebo?" The name was a pursing on all the lips, a furrow on the brows. Only one or two smiled even tentatively. *"Remember Miss Ebo?"*

"If you have forgotten," I said, "it's a long time ago. If you remember, it was only yesterday. But even if you have forgotten her, I can see that you haven't forgotten the lessons she taught you. Only you have remembered the wrong part. You only half learned the lessons. You've eaten the husks and thrown the grain away. She tried to tell you. She tried to teach you. But you've all forgotten. Not a one of you remembers that if you turn the page everyone will live happily ever after, *because it was written that way*. You're all stranded in the introduction to the story. You work yourselves all up to the climax of terror or fear or imminent disaster, but you never turn the page. You go back and live it again and again and again.

"Turn the page! Believe again!

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You have forgotten how to believe in anything beyond your chosen treadmill. You have grown out of the fairy tale age, you say. But what have you grown into? Do you like it?" I leaned forward and tried to catch evasive eyes. "With your hopeless, scalding tears at night and your dry-eyed misery when you waken. Do you like it?

"What would you give to be able to walk once more into a morning that is a-tiptoe with expectancy, magical with possibilities, bright with a sure delight? Miss Ebo taught us how. She gave us the promise and hope. She taught us all that everyone will finally live happily ever after *because it is written that way*. All we have to do is let loose long enough to turn the page. Why don't you?"

They laughed politely when I finished. I was always the turner of phrases. Wasn't that clever? Fairy tales! Well—

The last car drove away from the school. I stood by the fence in the dark school yard and let the night wash over me.

Then I was a child again, crying against the cold mesh fence—hopeless, scalding tears in the night.

"Miss Ebo. Miss Ebo!" My words were only a twisted shaping of my mouth. "They have forgotten. Let me forget too. Surely it must be easier to forget that there is a page to be turned than to know it's there and not be able to turn it! How long? How long must I remember?"

A sudden little wind scooted a paper sibilantly across the sidewalk . . . *forever . after . . . forever after* . . .

London Calling!

The Fifteenth World Science Fiction Convention will be in a sense the first *World* convention—the first to be held outside of North America. This coming-of-age of science fiction will take place on the weekend of September 6-8 at the Kings Court Hotel, London. More details in later issues; but to participate (in flesh or in spirit) in what should be one of the most important and enjoyable of all conventions, send your registration fee of $1 now to The Secretary, World Science Fiction Society, 204 Wellmeadow Road, Catford, London S. E. 6.

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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

I FEAR MY RECORD AS A PROPHET isn't very good, even on a short-range basis. Last month I was prophesying an upswing in new s.f. novels for 1957—a plausible prophecy perhaps, from publishers' announcements; but the announced novels, when finally published, don't wholly fulfil their promise. Quantity is up (6 novels since the last of these monthly surveys), but quality is something else again.

Best of an imperfect lot is James Barlow's ONE HALF OF THE WORLD (Harper, $3.50*). This is a story of espionage and counterespionage in 1960, during the Soviet occupation of England; and of the surprisingly many recent novels of future Occupation (why should this be so prominent a fictional theme of our time?), only C. M. Kornbluth's NOT THIS AUGUST is comparable in plausibility, immediacy and conviction.

The protagonist is a policeman (the author himself is an Enquiry Officer for the city of Birmingham) working for the Occupiers in Internal Security—an understanding and sympathetic man who has fallen into accepting the Occupation because he has nothing else to believe in. His slow conversion to Christianity, through a girl and the grace of God, forces him to become a double agent, engaged in "detecting" the acts of sabotage which he himself organizes as a member of the Christian underground. The body of the novel is absorbing, both melodramatically and spiritually; but the ending falls off badly in both respects. The plotting becomes arbitrary and foolish; and the author reveals a regrettably oversimplified concept of Christianity, ignoring its great and terrible depths and complexities (which have been treated in science fiction by C. S. Lewis and Walter M. Miller, Jr., among others), and a surprising disregard for all other religious and ethical systems.

Frederik Pohl's SLAVE SHIP (Ballantine, $2.75*; paper, 35¢) is at once fascinating and disappointing. Serialized last year in *Galaxy*, it tells of the curious shooting-cold-war late in this century in which Western civilization is completely mobilized against the jehad

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of the Caodais, who have burst forth from Indochina as a religious empire with the spreading power of the early days of Islam. The United Nations Navy pins its hopes on a fantastic secret weapon: a project to learn the speech of animals, which (or who) can then be mobilized into the Total Effort.

In his first solo novel, Pohl continues to show a Heinleinesque skill in the detailed indirect exposition of a convincing future; and the war and the speech-project are as characteristic of top-level true science fiction as anything you're apt to encounter these days. The story's another matter—episodic, weak on characterization, and resolved by a method as improbable as it is exasperating.

E. C. Tubb's ALIEN DUST (Avalon, $2.75*) is six episodes in the history (1995-2030) of the first Mars colony, nicely welded into a novel with the colony as protagonist. It's all plausible, sensible, even probable . . . and *very* familiar, without Arthur C. Clarke's poetic genius for revivifying outworn material. David Grinnell's ACROSS TIME (Avalon, $2.75*) is the first novel with the Grinnell by-line, and rather fun, if far from the standard of the Grinnell short stories. Time-traveling UFOs jerk our hero one million years into the future and launch him on a sketchy and unlikely transgalactic venture, brightened by such incidental items as an attractive post-Homo race of evolved simians and a wonderful "Ultimate Spaceship."

Fredric Brown's ROGUE IN SPACE (Dutton, $2.75*) is the result of a thumping error in judgment. In 1949 Brown published in *Super Science* a novelet called *Gateway to Darkness* (which you may find in the Margulies-Friend GIANT ANTHOLOGY OF S. F., Merlin, 1954) about a duel between a criminal and a power-mad scientist-politician—familiar and minor stuff, but fast-paced and moderately entertaining. God knows why Brown decided to blow up one of his least interesting stories to novel length; the result is that it's lost what small virtues it once possessed, and become slow, ponderous, humorless, pretentious . . . and sheer nonsense as "science." At that, it doesn't seem too bad beside Lan Wright's WHO SPEAKS OF CONQUEST? (Ace, 35¢), which starts off with a super-race that rules because "their science is in complete opposition to that of any other race in the Galaxy. Its principles are incomprehensible to other races." So our Earth hero captures one of its ships by a maneuver that just *might* fool a five-year-old, and in a few months Earth knows all the super-secrets and has gone far beyond them. I was strongly tempted to stop right there (p. 24) but made the mistake of going on. Matters do not improve in the remaining 136 pages.

The same Ace Double-Book of-

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fers one of the year's few anthologies: Donald A. Wollheim's THE EARTH IN PERIL. This contains 3 good-to-excellent stories by Kornbluth, van Vogt and Wells which have previously been reprinted (and reprinted *and* reprinted) plus 3 less familiar and markedly less admirable stories by Hamilton, Leinster and Walton. A more rewarding collection is THE FIRST WORLD OF IF, edited by James L. Quinn and Eve Wulff (Quinn, 50¢). Anthologists have tended to concentrate, among magazines still extant, on *Astounding, Galaxy* and F&SF; and only a handful of stories from *If* have hitherto appeared in book form. Publisher-editor Quinn and his charming assistant [no, I haven't met her; it's just a safe guess—the average of women-in-s.f. runs astonishingly high] have assembled 20 stories from *If*'s first 5 years (1952-1956) to make the anthologists look something less than omniscient. Of these 20, 4 have already been reprinted (3 in anthologies, 1 in an author-collection). The unknown 16 are at least of the average quality of any anthology-not-edited-by-Merril; Isaac Asimov's *Franchise*—Asimov in his infrequent and always welcome vein of gentle intimacy—would stand out in any company, and stories by Blish, Dick, Drussaï, Fontenay, Hetschel and Young are not far behind. The stories are all short (under 7000 words) and gratifyingly free of the wordage-for-wordage's-sake too common in most s.f. magazines. The evidence of this first volume leads one to hope for an annual WORLD OF IF as companion to our own BEST FROM F&SF (*Adv.*).

From a purist's point of view, Whit and Hallie Burnett's 19 TALES OF TERROR (Bantam, 35¢) is only part-fantasy (4 stories), but the curious tone of all the stories (and their extremely high quality) should appeal to every F&SF reader. "This is a book," say the editors, "of the hidden, strange, at times horrifying side of man's nature . . . stories of what happens when the night side of the mind takes over." This pattern overrides ordinary categories, to include a vivid symbolic fantasy by A. E. Shandeling, a witty social comedy (which may or may not be a fantasy) by Angus Wilson, a superb Poesque murder story by Jerry Wexler, and a wondrous adventure by Isak Dinesen which lies outside any possible categorizing. Most of the stories are from *Story,* most are new to book form, and altogether they make up the most stimulating collection I've read in a long time.

An odd and surprisingly successful anthology is Robert Terrall's GREAT SCENES FROM GREAT NOVELS (Dell, 50¢), which is *not* a prepackaged sterile substitute for reading, but a creative selection of scenes which stand up by themselves as short stories—and which

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should, by their quality, lead the reader back to the parent novels. Two of the 26 novels so excerpted are fantasies—Hawthorne's THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES and Kafka's THE TRIAL—and both provide admirable shorts. Malcolm Cowley's introduction is a model of direct, light-giving criticism.

Two reprint anthologies deserve special mention. John W. Campbell, Jr.'s THE ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION ANTHOLOGY (Berkley, 35¢), with 8 out of 22 stories, is stronger and more sharply selective than the 1952 original. Martin Greenberg's MEN AGAINST THE STARS (Pyramid, 35¢) was, in 1950, a pioneer among "patterned" anthologies; with 9 of the original 12 stories (8 of them also from *Astounding*), it is still an outstanding collection.

Among single-author roundups, Richard Matheson's THE SHORES OF SPACE (Bantam, 35¢) affords high-points as exciting as those in his 1954 BORN OF MAN AND WOMAN (reprinted as THIRD FROM THE SUN) and sustains a generally higher average than the earlier volume. F&SF readers should know (since 4 of the 13 stories first appeared here) that Matheson is incomparable in conveying the intimate human impact of a strange situation. A few of the situations here are trite or stem from questionable "science"; others are unique and convincing terrors (or humorous ironies). All become, in Matheson's treatment, concerns as urgent to you as to the participants. If you wish to view the Matheson technique abstractly, try the first story, *Being*, in essence a lurid pulp-horror story not worth writing—yet capable of holding you breathless for all its 14,000 words. If you wish to forget technique (or anything else that may be on your mind), try the stories in which the concept matches the treatment: *The Test* or *Pattern for Survival* (two of the finest stories I've ever had the privilege of buying) or *The Last Day* (one of the finest stories I've ever had the stupidity to reject).

Robert M. Coates's THE HOUR AFTER WESTERLY AND OTHER STORIES (Harcourt, Brace, $3.50*) contains 15 stories, all from *The New Yorker*, of which the title story and 4 others are fantasies. Mr. Coates is easily one of the most persuasive recorders of the unaccountable and disturbing moment—the moment, for instance, when the law of averages ceases to operate, or the moment when you realize that you have no memory of where you've been for the past hour. The straight fiction in the book and the cleverly plotted crime stories are admirable; but it is these fantasies, I think, that set the tone of the volume with a haunting sense of uncertainty and dislocation. Coates is a regrettably infrequent contributor to our genre, but unquestionably an important one.

I can review Anthony Arm-

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strong's THE STRANGE CASE OF MR. PELHAM (Crime Club, $2.95*) more comfortably here than I could in my "Criminals at Large" department in the N. Y. *Times Book Review*. As a mystery, a Crime Club novel, this is, as James Sandoe said in the *Herald Tribune*, "an extraordinarily irritating piece of cleverness," because (no matter how the publishers classify it) it's sheer fantasy—the story of a sedate London merchant who discovers that he has a double intent upon taking over his life and ultimately his soul. As the operations of the double increase in impossibility, the novel moves to the point where the only remaining answer is a supernatural one. With an odd balance of tone, it's a lightly amusing tale of suspense and terror and, read as fantasy, an attractive book. Remember that John Dickson Carr's THE BURNING COURT and William Sloane's TO WALK THE NIGHT, both now recognized as fantasy classics, were also originally issued as mysteries and justly considered "extraordinarily irritating."

There's been a small spate reently of books dealing with "facts" of the supernatural. In addition to James Reynolds' fine MORE GHOSTS IN IRISH HOUSES (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, $12.50*), noted here as one of 1956's best books, we have SHANE LESLIE'S GHOST BOOK (Sheed & Ward, $3*), SPOOKS DE LUXE by Danton Walker (Watts, $3.95*) and a reissue of William Oliver Stevens' UNBIDDEN GUESTS (Dodd, Mead, $3.50*). Sir Shane's collection is badly organized, and the stories are an indifferent routine batch; but he has a great many interesting things to say about Roman Catholic doctrine on ghosts and other branches of the "psychic" or paranormal, the liberal open-mindedness of which may come as a surprise even to many Catholics (as it did to this one). Walker's book is an essay in name-dropping; its 23 supernatural incidents are not in themselves markedly interesting or evidential, but you may be fascinated by the fact that they befell such people as Bea Lillie, Burl Ives, William Sloane and Mae West. The Stevens volume, originally published in 1945, is long, serious, thoroughgoing and moderately cautious and conservative—in all, one of the best statements of the case for Psychic Research.

Martin Gardner's MATHEMATICS MAGIC AND MYSTERY (Dover, $1*) is hardly fantasy or s.f., but I think it will delight a large number of our readers. As Mr. Gardner observes, "mathematical magic, like chess, has its own curious charms. [It] combines the beauty of mathematical structure with the entertainment value of a trick." And this "first attempt to survey the entire field of modern mathematical magic" is at once simple and scholarly, and wholly delightful.

*Books marked with an asterisk may be obtained through F&SF's RBS (see p. 62)

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Some time soon Gnome Press will publish EARTHMAN'S BURDEN, *a collection of the adventures of the Hokas (and Plenipotentiary Alex Jones) in their mimic cultures of the Wild West, the Spanish Main, Sherlock Holmes's London, the Foreign Legion and yet others, including one new adventure written especially for the book. Pending the arrival of what will probably be 1957's funniest book of science-farce, you can meet the most eager and sedulous culture-absorbers of the Galaxy in their first encounter with the world of High Diplomacy . . . and espionage, complete with The Papers, The Code, The Double Agent and The (improbably) Beautiful Spy.*

Undiplomatic Immunity

by POUL ANDERSON AND GORDON R. DICKSON

I was born with a dull, sickening thud. Had I but known what an aching void yawned before me, I would never have started down that lonely road.

"Well—er—" said Alexander Jones, putting down the sheet of paper. "It's . . . um . . . interesting. But don't you think some of the phrases are a little, hm, hackneyed?"

"Of course," said the Hoka with the tweed coat and calabash pipe. He leaned back in his chair and cocked his feet up on the electrowriter: a meter or so tall, roundbellied, golden-furred, ursinoid, an outsize teddy bear with stubby hands and eager button eyes. His name was W. Shakespeare Marlowe. "Don't you see, it is precisely by the use of the hackneyed phrase, the integral unit of language itself, that I create the Myth."

Alex, who was a tall and lanky young human, sighed. That was what came of letting a Hoka read 20th-century criticism. "But why did you stop there?" he asked.

"I have to leave something to the reader's imagination," pointed out the writer. "That's the quintessence of art. Think how dull and prosaic it would have been if I had gone on to describe the rest of my life."

"Oh," said Alex weakly. "I see."

"Those are the same views intrinsic to my essay, *The Novel As*

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An Art Form. I have it here—" W. Shakespeare Marlowe produced another sheet from his pocket. "Observe, it says: *'The Novel As An Art Form,* by W. Shakespeare Marlowe. Paragraph. The novel *is* an art form. Period. The end.' Succinct, isn't it?"

"Very," said Alex.

"I knew you'd understand. I call it the new look in writing. Actually, it has its roots in Hemingway. But I refined it to its present form. You see, the trouble with writers has always been that they wrote too much. It cut down their production."

"Cut it down?" asked Alex uncertainly.

"Of course. Look at Twain, Dickens, Melville—a mere few dozen books. Whereas I often write a dozen novels in one day."

"Oh, no!" groaned Alex.

"Quite," said the Hoka, sticking his hands in his pockets and puffing complacently on his pipe.

They were alone in the outer office of the Tokan delegation's suite. A broad window revealed the spectacular towers of League City, spearing into the serene late-afternoon sky of New Zealand, Earth. A webwork of elevated mobilroads knitted the pinnacles together, from the soaring bulk of this official hostel to the immense hall where the Council of the Interbeing League met.

From the adjoining room came subdued squeaks of excitement. Alex wondered what the other Hokas were up to. So far he had kept them out of trouble, but . . .

W. Shakespeare Marlowe, his secretary, was a very mild case, having merely gone overboard for authorship. But the energy, enthusiasm, and literal-mindedness of Alex's charges could lead to their playing any role that struck their fancy with an almost hypnotized solemnity. It was fortunate that the Tokan business stood high on the agenda of the present Council session: the less time on Earth they had, the less chance for some disastrous escapade.

Alex glanced at the wall chrono. He was supposed to meet informally with Commissioner Parr in a few minutes, and had already dressed for the occasion in suitably dignified crimson tunic and green slacks. "We'd better be going, Marlowe," he said. The little Hoka stumped happily out with him.

Two slideways and a dropshaft brought them to a tasteful suite in which cocktails and canapes were laid out. Adalbert Parr, the Chief Cultural Commissioner, received them: a big, portly man with a florid face and wavy gray hair. He bowed stiffly, shook hands, and widened his eyes as Marlowe whipped out a pad and took notes. Then, with regulation heartiness, he waved at the others present.

"We were only to get acquainted, Plenipotentiary Jones," he said. "May I present the chief delegates

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from three planets in your sector. His Excellency, Representative His Highness Prince Idebar of Worben."

The Worbenites were from a fairly terrestroid planet, a highly civilized race, and Prince Idebar was known as one of the shrewdest diplomats in the Galaxy. He was tall, with sleek black hair, his face aged but still keen and aquiline, his carriage erect; indeed, to be completely human-looking he would only have had to trim his ears and remove his horns and spiked tail. The females of his species were less manlike. "Delighted, sir," he murmured.

"No more than I, sir," replied Alex with equal urbanity.

They bowed. Alex jumped back as the horns swept by his nose.

"Ahem!" said Parr. "May I present His Excellency, Tantho the Hairy, leader of the delegation from Porkelans."

This being was two meters high, barrel-shaped, with enormous four-fingered hands at the end of short, muscular arms. He wore only a pocketed belt, but long blue fur covered his body. Two small eyes peered out of a face mostly hair, with just a suggestion of snout. "Most pleased," he rumbled in the official English of the League.

"Her Excellency, Miss Zuleika MacTavish of Bagdadburgh," intoned Parr.

As Her Excellency came into view around the bulk of Tantho, Alex had a sense of being hit with a perfumed blackjack. The Scottish-Arabic colony, founded by a rather puritanical group, had followed the usual law of reaction to interesting extremes. Zuleika MacTavish was tall and willowy, with flowing brown hair and great liquid eyes and a wide soft mouth and . . . well, the few wisps of colored translucency making up her native costume gave even an old married man like Alex a slight impulse to throw back his head and howl.

However, plenipotentiaries do not howl, or slaver, at beautiful representatives from neighboring planetary systems. Not if they want to stay on good terms with the Cultural Office of Earth Headquarters and—most particularly—their wives. So Alex goggled and sputtered in what he hoped was a suitably diplomatic manner, and scarcely noticed the dark, hawk-faced Colin MacHussein who was introduced as the delegate's special assistant.

"Please sit down, gentlebeings," said Parr. A servant offered a tray of drinks. Alex reached for an interesting-looking green one. Prince Idebar muttered an alarmed *"Garrasht!"* and caught his arm and warned:

"Excuse me, sir. That happens to be made from the jithna leaf of my planet. I believe it is chemically quite similar to poison ivy." Alex shuddered his thanks, and

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Idebar took the drink himself and sipped with practiced grace.

"Oh, His Highness has no reason to murder *you,*" said Zuleika MacTavish acridly. She took a cigaret from her belt pouch and a long holder from her décolletage. Alex came out of a reverie in which he wished he could be—temporarily, of course—a cigaret holder, to hear Parr exclaim:

"Please! We save the, ah, disagreements for the agenda. This is merely a social gathering. My own concern is with Plenipotentiary Jones's planet, Toka, but I thought an exchange of views with his neighbors out in Sector Seven might be . . . enlightening. He is here to see about getting the autochthones upgraded."

Alex nodded. "The Hokas have met the requirements for Class C by establishing a planet-wide peace authority," he said—careful not to add a description of a meeting of teddy bears from nations modeled on the Wild West, Victorian England, the East Roman Empire, King Arthur's realm, and others. "Guiding them is, of course, my task, and I believe they are now ready for Class C." That was mostly a technicality, involving science scholarships for qualified natives, but an essential step on the path to full autonomy and membership in the Interbeing League.

The catch was, there were too many planets in process of becoming civilized, each a complicated special case. The League Council voted on their status, but in practice, of necessity, always followed the recommendation of the Commissioner. Which meant that Parr had to be convinced. Alex prayed that Worben, Porkelans, and Bagdadburgh had no objections to the upgrading. Quite apart from the Hokas themselves, it would mean a substantial raise in salary for him.

However, the little session was uneventful. The diplomats made polite noises and then returned happily to throwing courteous venom at each other. Alex got a distinct impression that there was trouble between Bagdadburgh on the one hand and Worben and Porkelans on the other. It was with some relief that he finally excused himself.

W. Shakespeare Marlowe followed him cheerily down the hall. "I can never thank you enough for bringing me along," he burbled. "I have notes for three new novels . . . sensational! The *haut monde,* wild, dissipated, the orgies as world-weary, cynical beings flog their jaded senses with ever new and more fantastic pleasures—"

"I thought they were rather dull," said Alex, with regret.

"It is the business of the artist to select and rearrange his material," said Marlowe firmly. "How else shall he portray the essence of Life?"

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The main door to the Hoka suite opened before them and Alex trod in. He had left his delegates alone all day while he went through some necessary red tape, and had barely noticed that they sent out for some special items. Now, as he entered the living room, he stopped dead.

"Yipe!" he said.

Three Hokas sat around a table drinking tea. Two of them had adorned their rotund forms with archaic striped trousers and cutaway coats; top hats lay beside them. The third was completely muffled in a long black coat with its collar turned up, his beady eyes peering out from beneath a black slouch hat. They were being waited on by a fourth in chauffeur's uniform.

"What is this?" cried Alex. "Tharaxu—"

"The name," said one of the Hokas in cutaway, "is now Allenby. Foreign Office, don't y'know. Come join us in a spot of tea."

Alex's gaze roved wildly about the room. He saw numerous books from the hostel's extensive library. The authors were unfamiliar to him—Eric Ambler, E. Phillips Oppenheim, Sax Rohmer—they must be centuries old. The Hokas had apparently dialed for novels about the diplomatic service and—

He clenched his teeth and sat down. "I don't believe I've met the other gentlemen," he said in a hollow voice.

"Forgive me, old chap," said Allenby. "More tea, Bert."

The chauffeur poured.

"Who's Bert?" inquired Alex.

"Our chauffeur, of course," said Allenby. "Foreign Office has 'em, don't y'know." He bowed at the other cutaway. "Heinrichs."

"Heinrichs?"

"Code expert," said Allenby, gazing distantly at Heinrichs. "One of these efficient German types."

Heinrichs beamed. He had always been nearsighted and worn contact lenses; these he had now discarded for two monocles.

"Code?" choked Alex.

"Naturally," said Allenby. "My dear old chap (more tea, Bert. Thanks), surely you don't imagine we'd dare communicate with the home office except in code?"

"Oh," said Alex. Allenby sipped at his tea. Marlowe took notes. "And . . . er . . . this other gentleman?" said Alex when it became clear that the Hoka in the black hat was not going to be introduced.

Allenby looked around the room, leaned over the table, put a furry hand to his mouth, and whispered: "That's Z."

"Z?"

"Z," breathed Allenby. "You remember Z, of course. The chap who was so useful to us at the time of the Balkan crisis."

"Oh," said Alex.

He was too late. The Hokas

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were already off on their own path. He could only play along. "Well, gentlemen," he sighed, "you must not forget that this delegation has an important job to do—a *very* important job."

"Hear, hear," cheered Marlowe.

"The future of Toka depends on it," said Alex earnestly. "If we don't get upgraded this time, we can't apply again for twenty years."

"Roight!" said Bert.

"Bert!" said Allenby.

"Sorry, guv'nor," said Bert.

"We have to remember that we are on trial—"

"More tea, Bert," said Allenby.

"Yes, sir."

"On trial, I say. The future of Toka depends on our making a favorable impression. You must remember—"

"Knockout drops, Bert."

" 'Ere you are, sir."

Alex frowned, but was too busy explaining to inquire what was meant. "In most cases," he went on, "there is a delicate situation existing just under the surface of polite intercourse—"

"Let me give you a fresh cup of tea, old bean," said Allenby.

"Thanks," said Alex. "As I was saying, there are conflicts—" He took a swallow from his cup. "There can be situations that—"

The floor came up and hit him.

He struggled back to consciousness to find himself neatly laid out on a couch, and the suite empty. Two hours had passed; it was now 2030 o'clock. He felt like retreaded oatmeal.

After a while he managed to get to his feet, stagger to the bathroom, and gulp down an athetrine tablet. The pains vanished and his head cleared.

"Omigawd!" said Alex. "The Hokas!" He went out the door at full gallop.

Each floor of the hundred-story hostel—this was the 93d—had its own lounge. Alex burst into this room and found its comfortable chairs deserted, its robobar humming softly as it polished glasses . . . no sign of his charges. He was about to dash on, he knew not whither, when a glorious shape undulated through the rear entrance, paused, and sped forward. The soft eyes of Zuleika MacTavish fluttered incredible lashes at him and the soft hands with their luminous nail polish gripped his.

"Oh . . . Plenipotentiary Jones," she whispered. "I was hoping I could find you alone."

"You were?" squeaked Alex.

"Please," she said. "I'm in desperate need of help."

Alex, who had been pawing at the floor in his eagerness to be off, began to paw a little more slowly. Not that the situation wasn't bad, with the Hokas on the loose; but after all, any gentleman who called himself a gentleman—

"Well, er, hruff!" he coughed. "If there's anything I can do—"

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Zuleika leaned toward him, still several centimeters removed but slightly indenting his tunic. "It's not for myself, it's for Bagdadburgh," she pleaded. "There's so few of us, and those awful Worbenites and Porkelugians—" Suddenly her eyes were swimming with tears, and Alex put a fatherly arm around her.

"There, there," he began.

A shrill voice exploded behind him. "I say!"

Alex jerked free of the ambassadress and turned to confront the stern gaze of Allenby.

"Oh, er, good evening," he mumbled.

"Beg your pardon, old grapefruit," said the small Hoka frostily. "Your presence is required at the suite."

"Alex," breathed Zuleika, "I just have to talk with you."

"Yes, yes," said the man. "Later . . . to be sure, later—"

Zuleika gave him a thousand-watt smile through a mist of tears and walked slowly off. Alex stared after her, trying to recall the equations of simple harmonic motion. Allenby tugged at his sleeve. As they left, he found himself blushing, and the more angry he got on that account the more he blushed.

"Well, Allenby," he said gruffly.

"Well," repeated Allenby.

"Charming young lady," said Alex in a frantic tone.

"Yes. I rather imagine you feel like a father toward her."

"Why, of course. How did you know?"

"We," said the Hoka wisely, "know their methods."

"Methods?" asked Alex in bewilderment. "Whose methods?"

"You force me to be blunt, old parsnip," said Allenby. "The methods of beautiful spies. . . . Hist! Not another word till we're back. These walls have ears, don't y'know."

"Oh, no!" groaned Alex as he realized he had been cast in the role of Colonel Blimp.

"Play up, play up, and play the game!" said Allenby, patting him on the arm. "Stiff upper lip. Bite the bullet." With a courteous gesture, he produced a bullet from his cutaway and offered it.

"Play up yourself!" screamed Alex. "Now you listen to me—"

The slideway had borne them around a corner, and they saw Commissioner Parr's ponderous form on the opposite strip. He waved agitatedly at them and stepped onto the motionless central band. "Plenipotentiary Jones!" he barked. "What do you make of this?"

And he thrust under Alex's nose a large, ornate Oriental dagger.

"Found it stuck in my door," went on Parr. "Pinning down a note." He held out the message, and Alex read:

WHERE ARE THE SECRET PAPERS?

"Ulp," said Alex.

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"Do you know whose idea of a joke this is?" rumbled Parr. He glared suspiciously at Allenby. "Have you seen this knife before?"

"I?" asked the Hoka. "Can't say I have, old cabbage." He helped himself to a pinch of snuff.

"Well . . . it's odd, to say the very least." Parr bowed stiffly, got back onto the westbound strip, and dwindled down the hall. Alex and Allenby continued east in a chilled silence.

The human found the suite in a state of hideous confusion. Its tables were heaped with paper of all sorts and varieties, and Heinrichs was busily examining these with a magnifying glass. Bert was making tea, Marlowe was writing, and Z sat muttering into his slouch hat.

"*Ach!*" said Heinrichs, looking up. "Vere vas der *hochwohlgeborene Bevollmachtiger* Jones?"

"With," said Allenby in tones of deepest deprecation, "*her.*"

"*Her?*"

"*Her,* herself!"

"Now cut it out!" roared Alex. "Now listen to me! I won't have this—I positively forbid—" Suddenly and belatedly he realized from the happy expressions on the furry faces that he was once more sliding into the character they had determined he should play.

As he stood sputtering, Marlowe looked up and said eagerly: "What do you think of this, Jones? I'm making a new translation of the *Iliad.*"

"You are?" asked Alex blankly.

"Yes, indeed," beamed Marlowe. "I have chosen to represent the timeless spirit of Homer by using the metrical form most characteristic of our age, a rapid, mellifluous—well, hear for yourself." He cleared his throat and read:

"I sing of the wrath of Achilles,
which gave the Achaeans the willies.
Help me tell, O my muse,
how Troy got the goose
and of quarrels which really were dillies."

Alex was saved from making noises like a critic by the buzzing of the visiphone. He pressed the button and Parr's thunderous face popped into the screen. "Plenipotentiary Jones!" he said. "Would you come down to my apartment right away, please?"

Alex nodded and clicked off, wondering what had happened now.

"Z," said Allenby, "attend the Chief."

"Und better you take mine Luger," said Heinrichs, withdrawing a young cannon from his top hat.

"No!" cried Alex. But as he sped out, Z followed relentlessly.

It occurred to the human as he went down the corridor that he could at least get an explanation of what had been going on. "Z," he said firmly, "I want an explanation of what has been going on.

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In the first place, what was the idea of giving me knockout drops?"

"Policy, sir," said Z.

"Policy?" Alex snapped his mouth shut. Oh, no, he thought, he wasn't going to get into one of those brain-tangling discussions this time. "What about that dagger and note?" he demanded.

"Sir?" asked Z cautiously.

"Do you know anything about that?"

"What can one say?"

Alex stared at him, but he volunteered nothing further. "Well," asked the man finally, "what *can* one say?"

"Exactly," said Z mournfully.

"Exactly *what,* for the love of Saturn?" snarled Alex.

"Exactly nothing."

Alex choked. "All right," he said. "Tell me one thing. Just one thing. What's this all about? What's supposed to be going on?"

"Ah," said Z darkly. "Who can tell?"

"Can't you?"

"Sir!" cried Z reproachfully, drawing himself up. "I'm in the secret service. I never tell."

Before Alex could think of a reply, they were at the Commissioner's suite. Grouped around a table were Parr, Prince Idebar of Worben, Tantho the Hairy of Porkelans, and Zuleika MacTavish of Bagdadburgh. An air of tension prevailed.

"Oh, good evening, Jones," said Parr distantly. "Ah . . . this is one of your delegation?"

"Um, yes," said Alex. "Commissioner, Your Excellencies, Mr. Z."

"How do you do, Mr. Zee?" said Parr.

"One has one's methods," said Z mysteriously.

Parr looked a bit startled, but turned to Alex. "I asked you here because your delegation and Their Excellencies all have accommodations on the 93d floor, and no one else. Possibly we can throw some light on a, ah, very delicate and unfortunate situation. It seems that Their Excellencies have had their suites broken into and stripped of papers."

"Aha!" said Z.

They all stared at the Hoka. "What?" asked Tantho.

"Just aha," said Z. He pulled an Oriental dagger from his sleeve and began idly to clean his fingernails with its tip. Parr's eyes narrowed, but before he could speak, Zuleika flared:

"Can't you see, these, these *gentlebeings* were out to find what they could in my quarters, and just pretended to have their own broken into as well?"

"Your young Excellency," crackled Prince Idebar, "may I point out that a planet must resent slurs on its accredited representatives?"

"Please!" said Parr. "We only wish to get to the bottom of this. I suggest that the Interstellar Bureau of Investigation—"

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"No!" snapped Tantho and Zuleika, while Idebar murmured: "I am afraid that that is impossible."

"Ah—" began Z, but Alex hastily clapped a hand over his muzzle and babbled: "I'd better check my own place. I didn't notice any signs of burgling, but . . . I'll let you know—" With a sick grin, he hurried Z out.

"—and furthermore," stormed Alex when he was back in his suite, "breaking into the quarters of Council delegates is a territorial violation. I never saw anything like this! How did you—"

"Aow, naow," said Bert modestly.

"You, Bert?" whispered Alex.

"Of course, old onion," said Allenby proudly. "Bert is an ex-master criminal (now reformed, right, Bert?) and it was jolly old child's play for him, eh, what, what, what?"

"But those locks are finger-sensitive—pickproof!" said Alex.

"Simple, h'it were," said Bert. "H'I took me little h'ax—" He reached inside his uniform with a flourish and brought out an object like a giant jackknife with a hundred blades; from the body he snapped a small but wicked-looking axhead. "—then h'I took me little gouge"—he unfolded something like an icepick—"and me little jimmy, me little bryce and bit —"

Alex turned slightly green. "I see, I see," he groaned. "You needn't go into details."

"H'I picked those locks orl roight. H'I'd like ter see the lock h'I couldn't pick—"

"Bert!" reproved Allenby.

"Roight, guv'nor. Sorry, guv'nor." Bert lapsed into silence.

"—Anyway," said Alex after drawing a deep breath, "breaking into private offices and so forth . . . filling up our rooms with stuff like this—" He grabbed a handful of papers from under Heinrichs' magnifying glass. "What is this, anyhow? Here—

"'Dear Miss MacTavish: This is to notify you that payment on your account for three black silk negligees, Size 12, and four pairs Upthrust brassieres, 107 cm. large, is now overdue—' Hrump, we won't go into this. Hum." Alex cleared his throat and hastily shuffled the documents. "What's this, a private letter? Don't you know that one of the worst invasions of privacy is to read somebody else's—um, I see the Worbenites have adopted English as their own international language— *'Dearest Iddykins—'* Good Lord, *Iddykins! 'Dearest Iddykins, I had a dream last night and I dreamed you were speaking in the chamber of Earth but they had the ventilation turned up for the Chokgins representative. There you were, with nothing but your lightweight underwear on. For eighty years I've begged and prayed you to dress sensibly in your long*

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woollies, you know you get the sniffles so easily, and I've tried to be a good wife to you but the moment you are out of my sight you cast caution to the winds—'" Catching sight of the interested Hoka faces ringing him in, Alex broke off and cried wildly: "What do you want with this stuff?"

"Ve must decode," said Heinrichs.

"Ve must?" echoed Alex. "No . . . I mean—these aren't in code, dammit!"

"*Ja,* dey are."

"No, *no,* NO!"

"My dear old artichoke," said Allenby, "with all due respect, who is the code expert here, you or Heinrichs?"

"Heinrichs, of course!" roared Alex. "I mean—no, that's not what I mean. What I mean is— Now don't get me off on *that!* The point is, this is a complete farce. There's nothing going on here"—the door chimed and Alex backed toward it, talking as he went—"that requires daggers in doors, burgling—come in—reading personal papers and so forth—come in, I said—and so on, and now that I have you here I'm going to show you that this business of intriguing is just something you've dreamed up—"

Becoming impatient, he opened the door manually. Leaning against the jamb, his face shaded by the tartan burnoose, was the silent and faintly sinister Colin MacHussein.

"Oh," said Alex. "What is it?"

To the Hokas' unbounded delight, MacHussein started to lean forward as if to whisper confidentially in his ear. The only problem was that he kept on leaning, further and further, until with a rush he ended face down on the carpet.

"MacHussein!" gasped Alex.

The Bagdadburgian did not reply. But for this seeming rudeness he had a good excuse. It consisted of a headgear the back of which was matted with blood.

Alex spun around and counted his Hokas. They were all present. He sat down and buried his face in his hands.

" 'Ere, sir," said Bert sympathetically. " 'Ave a nice 'ot cup of tea."

"Thank you," said Alex in a weak voice, accepting it. Then, cautiously: "No knockout drops, are there?"

"Aow, no, sir. Cream and sugar, two lumps."

"Thank you," repeated Alex and drank. "It's good."

"Thank *you,* sir. Bucks yer h'up h'in a tight spot, a bit of tea, don't it, sir?"

"Yes," said Alex. "Yes, indeed. When it's been a bad day ever since morning and when a man's been murd—" He leaped as if stung. "WHAT," he screamed, "AM I DOING SITTING HERE AND DRINKING TEA?"

"Thirsty, perhaps?" suggested Marlowe.

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Alex slammed down the cup and saucer, shoving aside Z, who was about to search him for secret papers. To the plenipotentiary's immense relief, the man was alive: it was the unpleasant but not grave effect of a powerful supersonic stun beam fired at short range.

"The body, of course, will have to be disposed of," said Z.

"No!" Alex began to function again. "Get out—all of you. Go get Parr, get a doctor, but for heaven's sake don't tell anyone what's happened. Get out!"

They got.

Left alone, Alex tried to remember his first-aid training. There wasn't much he could do except leave MacHussein undisturbed. The usual result of supersonic stunning was amnesia covering the past several hours. . . . He grew aware that his fumbling had gotten blood all over his tunic and slacks. Hastily he went to the bathroom, stripped off the clothes, washed his hands, and donned a robe. As he came out, the door chimed again. "Parr," he muttered, and aloud: "Come in."

Zuleika MacTavish sine-waved through, closing the door behind her. Deep, agitated breathing expanded her chest, which was not something Alex would have considered possible had he thought about it dispassionately. "Alex!" she said in a frantic whisper. "There's not a minute to lose. I have to talk to you!"

"Oh—" Alex jittered about. "Well, er, sit down, but—"

"This is no time to sit down." She followed him across the room, completely overlooking the corpselike MacHussein. "This is the eleventh hour. Alex," she said, cornering him and seizing the lapel of his robe, "I know about you. I know your record. You have your heart in the right place."

"I do?" asked Alex feebly.

"Yes," said Zuleika. "Like me."

"Um . . . to be sure," mumbled Alex.

"You are the only man who can help me," cried Zuleika, throwing herself on his shoulder and bursting into tears.

"There, there," said Alex. He meant to pat her gently on the back, but somehow his hand slipped. "There, there, there." Getting no result from this, he disentangled himself, went to the brandy decanter, and poured out a stiff drink. She accepted it blindly and tossed it off at one gulp.

"It can't be that bad—" Alex was saying, when he was interrupted by a strangled, though ladylike, snort. Zuleika's finely molded face squeezed up, both hands flew to her throat, and she began to stagger around the room making ineffectual noises.

"What is it?" yelped Alex. Smitten with a horrible suspicion, he sniffed at the decanter. It was . . . yes, for his ambassadorial brandy the Hokas had substituted their

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native liquor, a 180-proof liquid dynamite which— "Omigawd! I'm sorry! Excuse me! 'Ere, 'ave a nice cup of 'ot— No, no, I mean, ice water—"

Zuleika downed it shakily, brushed aside his babbled apologies, and said with a new and fascinating huskiness in her voice: "No matter. Too much else to do. Prince Idebar and those awful Porkelugians—Goldfarb's Planet—you've got to help me! The whole future of Bagdadburgh depends on it!"

Alex found himself so busy unraveling her explanation that he forgot both MacHussein and the notoriously sudden wallop which Hoka brew delivers. Goldfarb's Planet was a terrestroid world out in Sector Seven; having no aborigines, it was open for colonization, but the award lay with the Council. Bagdadburgh, with a rapidly increasing population (if Zuleika was representative of its womenfolk, thought Alex, he could understand why they had a population problem), needed it badly, and would normally have been granted the title. Porkelans was also asking for it, but the reason was a mystery: their population was static. However, the Bagdadburgian intelligence service had discovered that Prince Idebar of Worben intended to support the Porkelugian claim—and his influence was so great that he was bound to get what he wanted unless he was blocked.

"But what's in it for Worben?" wondered Alex. "I know their present leaders belong to the Expansionist Party and they'd like more territory, but they already have the legal limit of colonies."

"The Porkelugian government is corrupt," said Zuleika fiercely. "Tantho and his associates . . . bribed . . . betraying their own planet. Bribed by dirty Worbenite neodymium."

"Um . . . wait . . . you mean if Porkelans gets Goldfarb's Planet—"

"The Tantho gang would admit Worbenite settlers. In a few years, there'd be so many settlers they could vote for autonomy. But the Goldfarbian government would be a Worbenite puppet. We know it. I tell you. Tantho is selling out his planet for Worbenite neodymium. Would I touch their tainted money? I would not. You would not. But Tantho will. He does. He touches their tainted money every day. I'll bet he's sitting in his suite right now touching Worbenite money."

"But how do you know all this?"

"We got spies," hissed Zuleika. "We found out . . . Tantho an' Idebar got a written agreement about it. Don't trust even each other . . . got a regular contract . . . tainted money." She looked at him with vague, though lovely, brown eyes. "You wouldn' touch Worbenite money, would you?"

"N-no," said Alex. "I guess not. Not if it's tainted."

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"Private contrac' . . . would be proof we need to bust rotten con—conshpi—plot. Bust it wide open. Colin s'posed to steal contrac'. Special agent of ours. Where's Colin?" Zuleika peered about in a charming misty fashion. "Will you help me, Alesh?"

"I, well—"

"Oh, thank you, Alesh!" cried Zuleika, staggering a trifle. "Tha's y'r name, isn' nit? Oh, Alesh, hol' onna me, I feel a li'l dizzy—"

The door chimed.

"Hurray for Bagdadburgh!" whooped Zuleika. "Bagdadburgh, my ain planet! Would I stop 'at anything for Bagdadburgh?" she demanded of the empty air. "No!" she answered with a ringing cry, dramatically seizing the front of her wispy tunic and ripping it across. Then she stumbled over MacHussein, looked down, whitened, screamed, and fell into Alex's arms.

The door opened and Commissioner Parr strode in with several Hokas. He stopped dead.

Alex stared at him, dumbfounded. He could see no reason why the Commissioner should look at him with loathing. Then, glancing at a full-length mirror across the room, he reeled. In its crystal depths he saw a man in a dressing gown clutching a hiccoughing girl with torn tunic while at his feet another man lay weltering in blood and behind him two tables groaned under stolen papers.

"Commissioner!" bawled Alex in tones of anguish. "You don't think—you can't believe—Commissioner!"

"Please, Mr. Jones," said Parr loftily, withdrawing. "Don't paw me."

Alex had been protesting his innocence for a couple of minutes now. The Commissioner did not appear to be convinced. He stood in the middle of the room and stared coldly at Alex while MacHussein lay on the floor and Zuleika lolled in a chair. Even the Hokas were silent.

"But it's not what it looks like!" gibbered Alex.

"Hiccup!" said Zuleika.

"*I* didn't stun this man!" cried Alex. "I sent for you myself—"

"And the representative?" asked Parr scornfully. "I imagine she, too, fell through the door in her present condition?"

"No! She just took a drink, that's all."

"Which you gave her."

"Well, yes, but—"

"Ha!"

"I gave her the wrong thing."

"Indeed you did."

"Whoops!" said Zuleika faintly. "Porkelans, Worben—poke 'em inna nose. Throw'm to the bushcats."

"Now, Mr. Jones," said Parr, "you still have the status of your office and, therefore, diplomatic immunity. My hands are tied. But I

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shall, of course, make urgent recommendations to my superiors tomorrow to the effect that Toka badly needs a new plenipotentiary and, as the result of—to put it in as kindly a light as possible—your incompetence, the planet is not yet ready for advancement in grade."

If he had been perfectly fair, Alex might have agreed that Parr had a case. But it was *his* job, his reputation, and his Hokas that were at stake. He clutched at a straw. "You don't understand," he said. "I discovered there was an illegal conspiracy between the Worben and Porkelans delegates. Since the IBI can't act against diplomats, I had to use my own status to get the proof."

He flattered himself it was a good speech, but Parr gave him only the thinnest of smiles. "If such proof is forthcoming," said the Commissioner, "naturally I will reconsider. May I see it?"

"I—well—I haven't got all of it yet—"

"I thought not. It is my duty to inform Their Excellencies of the situation, and the aspersions you have cast on them must, of course, be taken into account in judging your case. Good evening, Mr. Jones." Parr bowed and went out.

Alex sat down and grabbed at the decanter. Before he could sort out his whirling thoughts, Marlowe trotted in with the hotel physician.

"Ah," said the doctor cheerily, bending over MacHussein, "a stun beam. Tsk-tsk. But we're feeling much better now, aren't we?" Getting no response, he removed the burnoose and examined the injury.

Marlowe peered over his shoulder. "I am writing a novel about the medical profession," he squeaked. "Heroic, unselfish—"

The doctor reached for his stethoscope. It wasn't there. Z was peering into it for secret papers. "Hey!" said the doctor. Marlowe took busy notes as man and Hoka wrestled for the instrument. Winning the fight, the doctor checked his patient and prepared an athetrine injection. "This'll bring him around," he explained. "He should be all right when he wakes up."

"Aha!" said Z. "When he starts his drugged babbling—"

"Aren't you going to operate?" asked Marlowe, handing the physician a scalpel from his bag.

"For God's sake, no!"

"Not even a little operation?"

"*No,* I said! Get out of my way!"

"You have the soul of an editor," said Marlowe. "Instead of a novel, I think I shall write an exposé."

Somehow the doctor got MacHussein injected, bandaged, and laid out on a couch. He departed muttering.

Alex had recovered his wits enough to give Zuleika a soberpill. They stared grimly at each other.

"Well," said Alex, "I just hope you were right about that contract, and that we can find it. Otherwise—"

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The girl nodded. "No less than four of our best secret agents learned of its existence just before I left for Earth," she said. "It'll be here somewhere—the Embassy Building Offices aren't private enough, and naturally it must remain secret to all but a few."

"But why did you— Damn it," protested Alex, "this is serious and I have to think. Will you *please* get another tunic?"

Zuleika looked down and blushed. She was, of course, wearing her Upthrust brassiere, 107 cm. large, but it was made of Sheerglo fabric, which happens to be perfectly transparent. Hastily she went to the closet and borrowed one of Alex's tunics. He was a reasonably athletic young man, but it was still a tight fit around the chest.

"Why did you drag *me* into this?" moaned Alex.

"I had to have someone," she pleaded. "You see, I was getting suspicious of Colin. He has been a secret agent of Bagdadburgh for years, but since we reached Earth I saw him too often talking with Idebar. I turned to you because you, well, you looked so strong and self-reliant and . . . oh, I'm *so* grateful to you—"

"Hrumf!" said Alex. "Never mind. Quite all right."

Zuleika swayed closer. "The whole future of my planet depends on finding that contract," she whispered. "I would do *anything* to get it—to get your help—"

"Now . . . now, wait . . . I've got a wife and . . . and children on Toka and—and—" Alex backed up. His collar felt tight. "Just take it easy."

"After that reception today, Colin disappeared," went on Zuleika. "I got desperate and came here. It was hard to believe anything wrong about him; he's worked with me for years, and always been such a perfect gentleman, though with his looks he could— Never mind." She sighed. "Of course, his being attacked like this proves I was mistaken." She laid her hands on Alex's shoulders and searched his eyes with her own. "But we still need your help."

"And I guess I need yours," agreed the man. "If we can find that contract, it'll clear us, but—"

"I'll be quite frank with you," said Zuleika. "We were going to burgle their apartments, but apparently your Hokas beat us to it, though how you knew even before I told you—" She regarded him worshipfully.

"Oh, well," said Alex with due modesty. "One has a knack—*Hey!*"

Zuleika jumped. This made her quiver. This in turn distracted Alex so much that he could not go on for a few seconds. Then he turned excitedly to the stolen papers. "But the contract must be *here!*" he shouted. "We're saved!"

"Whee!" said Bert, doing a swan dive into the nearest stack.

It took only a few minutes in

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spite of the Hokas' help. After that there were several more minutes of frantic re-searching. At the end, Hokas and humans regarded each other rather bleakly.

There was no contract. There was not even a protocol.

"I found a treaty on import quotas of rugglepthongs," said Allenby with an air of having done his best.

Colin MacHussein groaned and stirred. Zuleika went to the couch and sat down, laid his head on her breast and stroked his hair. "There, there," she crooned.

MacHussein blinked his eyes open. *"Garrasht!"* he mumbled. "What—oh—" He grew aware of them. "What happened?"

"Does it hurt much?" asked Zuleika softly. "Here, lie back and rest."

"No, I'm all right," said MacHussein crisply. He sat up. "But everything else is wrong. You haven't found that contract, have you?"

"No," said Alex. "What happened to you?"

"I don't know." MacHussein frowned, concentrating. "My memory stops several hours ago. Amnesiac effect, you know. But where did all this litter come from?"

Alex explained. "Apparently the contract isn't in this hotel after all," he finished.

MacHussein shook his head. "It would have to be, for their purposes. Have to be available for reference. But they knew we'd lift it if we could, so they must simply have hidden it better than we realized."

Bert bristled. "They couldn't 'ide nothink from me!"

"Afraid they did. We'll just have to try once more." Alex opened the door and peered out, to meet the unmistakable chilled-steel gaze of an IBI man. Others patrolled the slideways as far as he could see.

"Er . . . we don't need protection," said Alex weakly.

"No, sir," said the IBI agent. *"You* don't."

Alex closed the door.

"Hist!" said Z, at the window.

"Hist yourself," said Alex bitterly. "We *can't* get to their rooms now."

"There are," said Z, "other methods."

"What other methods?"

"I cannot tell," said Z.

However, he could act, for he opened the window. Alex went over and looked out. A meter below was a flange, some 20 centimeters wide, running around the tower for the benefit of the window-cleaning machines. Beneath, except for other flanges, was a good 400 meters of sky terminating in some very hard-looking pavement.

"Ulp!" said Alex.

"En avant, old turnip," said Allenby with revolting cheerfulness. Carefully he donned his top hat, put a fresh carnation in his buttonhole, stuck a rolled umbrella

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under one arm, and vaulted out onto the ledge.

MacHussein swallowed. "I'd better stay and hold the fort," he offered.

"No—" Alex gave up. There was no escape for him, unless he wanted the Hokas to go off with no one to control them. But he took some satisfaction in pushing MacHussein to the window. "Miss MacTavish is the one to stay behind."

"Nonsense!" said Zuleika. "I told you I would do anything for my planet."

"Even on a window ledge?" asked Marlowe, interested.

"Even on a window ledge," she declared.

Alex got out into a fresh night wind that nipped his bare shanks but cooled his ears somewhat. Allenby was ahead of him; Bert, happily snapping and unsnapping tools from his instrument, came after; Zuleika, Z, MacHussein, and Marlowe followed.

Under better conditions Alex might have enjoyed the view. The great city sprawled for kilometers around, its arrogant pinnacles reaching for the stars, its roadways a faerie web of lights; far off, under a low moon, he could see the snowy heights of Mount Aorangi. But hugging a slick plastic wall with his heels sticking out over the edge of nothing—

"Naow 'ere, guv'nor," said Bert, "h'is the neatest bit of h'it h'all. See, h'I h'unfold this little drill, turn this little wheel, h'insert the nitro with this little 'hypodermic—clever, eh?" He nudged Alex knowingly in the ribs.

"Yipe!" said Alex.

There was a low wail behind him. Zuleika was shuffling along with her face to the wall. For her, though, this was not very practical.

"Turn me around, somebody!" she begged.

"Right-o," said Allenby gallantly. He reached past Alex and Bert with his umbrella. "Hold on to the end of this and step off the ledge; I'll swing you over to me. We Hokas are quite strong."

Alex assured her of this, and she obeyed. Then she vanished as the handle and the ferrule parted company. "Oh, piffle," said Allenby in an annoyed tone. "I forgot this was also a sword cane. Sorry, old girl."

Just in time, Bert grabbed her hair. This overbalanced Bert, who snatched at Alex. Alex clutched after Allenby, who also toppled but managed to throw his umbrella up for Z. The secret agent got it and went over the brink, dragging MacHussein along. Marlowe got MacHussein by the left foot and hooked his free elbow under the windowsill so he could take notes. Not till he had finished this did he use the really astonishing Hoka strength to draw himself back through the window and then haul in the rest. The most irritating part

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of it all was that as he pulled in the living rope, he piped forth a deep-sea chanty.

"Not making much progress, are we?" asked Allenby with undiminished good humor. His eye fell on Heinrichs, seated with paper and pencil. "Stop that and come along with us!"

"But I iss decoding!" protested Heinrichs.

"You can decode as we go," said Allenby sternly. He wheeled about and went over the sill again. There was nothing to do but follow him.

This time the path was negotiated without incident. They rounded the corner of the building and saw ahead of them the windows of the Porkelugian and Worbenite suites. The former glowed with light; the latter, beyond them, were dark.

The windows were broad enough so that the whole party could stand looking in. The upper transoms were open, and words drifted out—conversation between Prince Idebar, Tantho the Hairy, and Commissioner Parr, who were sitting about with drinks and cigars.

"—most kind of you, sir, to warn us about those Hokas," said Tantho.

"Oh, just doing my duty," said Parr. "But I'm sorry I can't legally recover those papers for you until Jones has been fired."

"No matter," said Idebar, waving his tail airily. "I assure you we are not so foolish as to leave confidential documents where any unscrupulous hireling could find them. We have our methods."

This was too much for Z. He whipped out a dagger and tossed it expertly up, through the transom and across the room, to stick quivering in the wall before Tantho's sheepdog nose.

"What's that?" roared Parr, leaping to his feet.

Z pulled down his slouch hat and rubbed his hands. "We too have our methods," he said with a fiendish cackle.

It is disconcerting, to say the least, to be having a private chat on the 93d floor of an official building, and then suddenly to have daggers quivering in the wall and see five teddy bear noses flattened against your windowpane. When one nose is surmounted by a top hat, one by a black slouch, one by a chauffeur's cap, and one by two gleaming monocles, the effect is positively unnerving.

"What kind of place is this, anyway?" stormed Tantho with a not unjustifiable huffiness.

"Spies!" hissed Idebar, gliding forward.

"Spies yourself!" said Zuleika.

"Cut that out!" said Alex raggedly. "We've got to—"

Allenby was already scuttling down the flange to the Worbenite windows. The rest followed. Bert got to work cutting out the living-room pane. Behind them, Parr

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looked out, bellowing like a wounded bull. "Thieves! Barbarians! You'll get psychorevision for this, Jones! You—"

"Not so fast, please," squeaked Marlowe, busily taking notes.

"He iss schpeaking in ein zimple double-transposition cipher," decided Heinrichs, looking over Marlowe's shoulder.

"—and naow me little saw," said Bert, "and me little roll of tape, and me little—"

The pane gave way with a crash, and the burglars scrambled through. There was only the vaguest possible illumination from outdoors, but as he fumbled for the switch Alex could see MacHussein's shadowy form atremble. "Sunspots, what a day!" stammered the Bagdadburgian. "I need a drink—" He groped over to a barely visible decanter and put it to his lips and shuddered with relief.

Alex turned on the lights as the outer door opened. An IBI man looked in. Z sent a dagger whisking past him. The IBI man withdrew and Alex scurried about locking all the doors.

Feet thundered in the corridor. "Open up!" bawled Tantho.

Alex groaned. "We've got to find that contract fast," he chattered, staring at the wild disorder left by the previous Hoka visit . . . or visitation. "They'll break in—and for all we know, it's in the Porkelugian suite—"

Allenby glared at an inoffensive chair, broke off its tail-rest, and ripped the cushion with his sword cane. "Not here," he announced.

"Of course it isn't," said Z. "Don't you know secret documents are always left in plain sight?" His eyes glittered around. "Aha! I've found it!" He snatched a framed paper off the wall. Alex took it with shaking hands and read:

WHEREAS H.H. IDEBAR FANJ HURTHGL HAS SATISFACTORILY COMPLETED THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN THE FIELD OF GLOGSNORGLING, NOW THEREFORE BY AUTHORITY OF THE REGENTS . . .

"It vill haff to be decoded, of course," said Heinrichs.

The door glowed as someone turned a raybeam on it.

"Too late," said Alex dully.

The door fell, and Parr, Idebar, Tantho, and a dozen grim-faced IBI men rushed through. Alex stared down the muzzles of their Holmans and raised his hands.

"I've got you now, Jones!" raged Parr. "Diplomatic immunity or no, I'm going to have you locked away till—"

"We are not disposed to be malicious, Commissioner," said Idebar with his usual suavity. "Obviously Jones is a public menace, but we see no reason to press charges against the others."

"Aha!" said Z darkly.

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"Guilty conscience, eh, what?" observed Allenby.

"To be sure," said Z. He tugged at Parr's sleeve. "Commissioner."

"What now?" demanded Parr, turning like a large elephant baited by a very small dog.

"Arrest that man," said Z, pointing to MacHussein.

"What for?" sputtered Parr.

"On suspicion."

"Suspicion of what? Who's suspicious of him?"

"I am," said Z with a sinister overtone.

"Now listen," screamed Parr, "that man was attacked himself—"

"Aha!" said Z. "That proves it."

"Proves what?"

"My suspicions."

"What suspicions?"

"None of your business," said Z, looking distrustfully at the Commissioner.

"My dear sir," broke in Idebar, "may I inquire what this is all about?"

Z turned to Allenby. "May he?"

"It should be referred to the home office," said Allenby. "But a field agent has to stick his neck out now and then, what? Damme, I *will* stick my neck out. He may."

"Go ahead, Your Excellency," bowed Z.

"I *was* going ahead," choked Idebar. "Mister . . . Mr. Jones, will you do something about these—these—"

"Allenby, what's the meaning of this?" gasped Alex.

The elegantly dressed Hoka extracted a handkerchief from his pocket and flicked invisible dust from his sleeve. "My dear old mangel-wurzel," he said, "must we do *all* the work? We have ransacked three suites, issued a mysterious warning, questioned eighteen members of the hostel staff, decoded thirty-four documents, and gathered everyone here for the dénouement. Having done this, we now sit back and wait for you to do what is yours, to wit, reveal what is behind all this." He beamed, took a pinch of snuff, and added to MacHussein: "Sorry, old chap. You played the Great Game well."

The Bagdadburgian grinned and shrugged. "Let's get this over with, Commissioner," he suggested. "I could use some sleep."

Alex's brain leapfrogged. "Hey!" he cried.

"Arrest Jones," said Parr to the IBI agents. "I'll take the responsibility."

"Hold on there!" said Alex. He was still panting and shivering with the revelation that had burst on him. "Parr, I told you there was an illegal contract between Idebar and Tantho. That's the truth—and I now know where it is!"

"Oh, Alex," crooned Zuleika.

The man flung his arm dramatically out. The effect was somewhat spoiled by his knocking over a floor lamp, and in any event it is difficult to cut a heroic figure in a

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bathrobe, but he pointed at MacHussein and said with triumph: "You've got it!"

"You're raving!" said Idebar.

"Not very well trained in elocution, is he?" whispered Allenby to Marlowe.

"No," agreed the Hoka writer. "The proper phrase is, of course: 'You're mad, I tell you—mad, mad!'"

Alex backed away, speaking fast, as the IBI men closed in. "MacHussein isn't a human at all. He's a Worbenite. Do a little surgery on a Worbenite, he'll look just like an Arab. I can prove it. When he woke up, he used a Worbenite oath; I'd heard Idebar use it earlier. Well, anyone could do that, of course, but it's one point. Then Zulei—Her Excellency said he had been a perfect gentleman in all the years of working closely with her. And she was holding his head in a very, uh, comfortable position—but he sat up immediately and said he felt fine. Does that sound like a *human* male? Finally, when we broke in here just now it was quite dark, but he went right to the decanter and drank from it. How could he know it was brandy and not the jithna drink which would poison a human? The answer is, he couldn't . . . and he didn't care, because he's immune!"

"I really feel sorry for anyone in your mental state, Jones," purred Idebar. "Why, MacHussein himself was stunned."

"Yes." Alex was backed into a corner now. He picked up the lamp and used it to fend off the IBI agents. "That was to divert Zuleika's growing suspicion from him and make us look bad to Parr. You must have been alarmed when your suite was raided, and been fairly sure the Hokas did it, so you wanted us under suspicion and therefore, you hoped, immobilized. Actually, MacHussein was planted on Bagdadburgh years ago, to work his way up and be in a position to thwart— Leggo there!" He wrested the lamp from an agent's hand and swatted him.

"I shall file an official protest against your unbridled language," said Tantho with dignity.

Bert took out his giant burglar tool, joggled Prince Idebar's elbow, and tried to interest the elder statesman in a lecture on lock-picking.

"You knew Zuleika's agents would be trying to get that document," went on Alex. "You knew they might find it in any hiding place or waylay anyone carrying it —except one person, their own trusted comrade, MacHussein! He's carrying it right now!"

The dark-faced man sneered and turned to go. "I won't bother answering that," he said. "Goodnight."

It was a mistake. Allenby made a beautiful flying tackle, shouting something about the playing fields of Eton. Bert picked him up by

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the ankles and shook him. And as he lay dazed, Z extracted the paper with a grand flourish and snapped it before Parr's eyes.

There was a long silence.

"Well?" said Parr when he had finished reading.

"Sleight-of-hand," blustered Tantho. "Planted on him."

Idebar nodded, elevating his brows. "There is also the matter of diplomatic immunity," he said in an ice-slick voice.

Parr reddened. "Yes," he said. "There is. I can't do anything to punish you—nobody can. But I can tell the Council what I saw. That will settle who gets Goldfarb's Planet." He bowed heavily at Alex. "My apologies, Plenipotentiary Jones. I shall file an account of this daring exploit in your already distinguished record and, of course, recommend Toka for upgrading. Good evening, gentlebeings."

He went out. His IBI troop followed. There was another silence, broken only by Alex's wheezing. This was choked off by a long and passionate kiss, after which it resumed somewhat more noisily.

Prince Idebar stalked up to him. "Congratulations," he said with a vitriolic note. "You have, ah—"

"—foiled me," suggested Marlowe.

"Thank you. You have foiled—"

"Perhaps 'checkmated'?"

"Checkmated me, then. Thank you!" gritted Prince Idebar.

"Quite all right," said Marlowe.

"Jones," said Idebar, "you have won. But I am not without influence, even now, and I shall certainly not let you continue your career unmolested."

Alex smiled sweetly. "I have diplomatic immunity," he said.

"If you think that will help—"

"I think it will . . . Iddykins."

The Worbenite started. "What?"

"Iddykins," said Alex. "There is the little matter of your winter underwear, Iddykins. Tell me, are you wearing it now? You have a very devoted wife, Iddykins, and I can think of several news services which would be happy to print a sample of her devotion . . . shall we say, a letter?"

"Um . . . yes." Idebar's aristocratic face purpled. "You do have the upper hand, it seems. Very well, sir." He stalked out, his tail lashing his ankles.

Tantho the Hairy started to follow. Alex grabbed his arm and pointed to the semi-conscious MacHussein. "Better take him along," advised the human. "He's no more use to you, and might as well return to Worben. They can regenerate his normal appearance there."

Zuleika giggled. "I imagine," she said, "he'll be the first humanoid male in history who actually wanted to grow horns."

Alex blushed and led his Hokas out. Zuleika looked as if she might continue that line of thought, and he valued his own marriage.

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Carol Emshwiller hated writing. In high school she was a violinist, barely making C's in English. In college, still loathing the writing of anything, from term papers to letters, she switched to art—which was fine, because she met a man in Life Class, married him, and honeymooned in France on an art Fulbright. She became a suburban-wife-and-mother, still hating to write . . . until her husband introduced her to science fiction. Then, in her words, "Something clicked. So this *is what writing is all about. It's not at all that stuff in high school or freshman English!" Now she writes—in a playpen, "ever since I found out that's the one place my little girl doesn't want to be"—and writes with refreshing insight and individuality. I've a hunch you'll be seeing a number of Mrs. Emshwiller's playpen-products in F&SF, starting with this evocative tale of (to paraphrase John Donne) a first strange and fatal interview, of all desires which thereof did ensue, and of long starving hopes.*

The Coming

by CAROL EMSHWILLER

He was stick thin, and he walked as a scarecrow might walk, lifting his feet high and slapping them down. He was dressed like a scarecrow too, but the expression on his face was different, not blank or dumb, more like someone in a trance, lips parted, eyes half closed, head thrown back.

He looked as if he might not notice the village as he came to it, but he did. At least he saw the garbage can set out by the road. His eyes flickered wider and he turned to the side, opened the lid and looked in. The stench of rotting fruit came out but he didn't seem to notice.

There was an elderly lady there on the porch watching, but he didn't notice her either or didn't care that she saw him.

"No, no," she called to him. "Wait. I'll get you something," and she hurried inside. When she came out again with bread and butter carefully wrapped in waxed paper, he was going on down the road.

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"Oh," she sighed, but he was too far for her to go after.

Nina sat at the dining room table, her homework spread out in front of her, but not studying. She sat as if in a trance, head thrown back, lips parted, eyes half closed.

She was old enough to be thinking about her hair and fingernails and clothes but obviously she didn't. Still, she might have been pretty if she hadn't been so thin and pale, and if her eyelids didn't always droop in a sleepy way.

Her mother came in as she sat leaning back this way by her homework. "I give up. I just give up," her mother said.

Nina jerked her head back straight and opened her eyes wider. "No!" she said, startled.

"No what? If you don't keep your mind on your work you'll be set back again this year."

"I tried, really, but it just happens."

"If you can't concentrate anymore than that, I give up. Take the baby outside now while there's still some sunshine and try, *try* to keep your mind on what you're doing."

He came down the street just as Nina and her mother came out to take the baby carriage down the porch steps. His feet made a flapping sound in the street and they both turned to look at him.

He stopped near them. His eyes opened wider, his head tilted to the side and he looked at Nina and she looked back. His mouth worked up and down twice before any words came out. "One . . . one here . . . too. . . ." he said.

"Nina," her mother said, "get him some left-over meat loaf and some bread. Quickly now. We don't want him hanging around." And Nina turned and went in her usual way, not fast.

She came back with the bread and meat and handed it to the man. He took it, not thanking her or nodding even, but just looking.

"Go along now," her mother said, but still he stood, holding the paper package as if he didn't know or care what it was.

"Go along. I've no patience with tramps and I've a gun in the house and I know how to use it. Go along now." She made pushing motions with her hands.

He stood, trancelike, a moment more and then he turned slowly and walked off with his high step, and Nina stood and watched him with her eyes almost shut.

"Take the baby and go down the other way. Don't go far. Dad will be back and supper's almost ready."

He veered to the right off the main road, then took another right, went two blocks down and there was the girl. He came up beside her and said again, "One . . . one here."

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She wasn't afraid. She just walked on and he walked beside her. "Maybe," she said.

"Yes," he said, "yes. . . ."

"It seems so."

They went without talking by the river and across the park and back then to the main road.

Her mother saw them from the kitchen window. "Nina!" she screamed. "Nina, come away home this instant." The man stopped and stood where he was and Nina came at the same slow walk she always went.

"The baby, is he all right? Don't you realize what that kind of man is like? Why he might . . . do anything. Don't you know the way he looked at you? I give up. I just give up on you, Nina." And when her father came home her mother told him about Nina and the tramp and how horrible he was and how he couldn't even talk straight.

"He better watch out," her father said. "He better keep away from here."

Her father went to work at seven the next morning. As he came out on the porch he saw the tramp at the corner of the yard by the lilac bushes, just standing, long hair rumpled and sticking straight up, head thrown back, mouth open, looking more asleep, standing up there, than awake.

Nina, just coming down to breakfast, heard her father's shout and saw him come back in the house.

"He's dangerous," he said, "standing out there like that. I think he's just plain crazy. He won't go when I tell him either. Get me the rifle," he told her mother, "I'll give him a good scare."

He went out with the gun and shouted at the tramp. The man shook his head and blinked, but didn't move to go. The window opened in the house next door and Mr. Morton poked his head out and pointed his finger. "You, you. Get out of town. We don't want your kind around here."

Nina's father said, "If I see you around my house again I'll take a shot at you and I mean it," and he shook the gun.

The man didn't say anything. He didn't look frightened or cowed. He just turned and walked away at his jerky walk.

"The guy's nuts," Mr. Morton said.

"He's been lookin' at my Nina."

"A guy like that isn't safe to have around. You can't tell what they'll do next," Mr. Morton said. "I used to know one like that in the army. Never really did anything s'far as I know, but you just can't tell, and you with a girl and all."

Later that morning Nina sat in the tenth grade room, but everything around her seemed dim and

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unreal, worse than usual even. When she was called on she could only mumble and blink.

The music was in her head. The poetry without words, the song without a tune, the rhythm without a beat. She could do nothing but listen. The undercurrent of unhappiness colored it as usual. The knowing she would not pass the tenth grade, would never graduate and that they would all be unhappy about her. But this was worth it all, this world feeling, this life-beat, this song . . . of the universe.

Suddenly a picture came to her mind. This had never happened before. It was a picture of a grove of trees and a black bridge and a cindery hill with railroad tracks on top. In the grove was a tiny fire and a tin can of water on a stone beside it. The water steamed and was bubbling a little on the side closest to the flames. Then a train came and there was a rush of wind and sound.

She woke with the teacher shaking her shoulder and slapping her cheek. "Go down to the nurse, Nina, and tell your parents you must have a complete physical and soon. I'll send them a note about it. You go now. Mary'll go along with you."

"No." Nina shook her head. "I'm all right now. I'll go by myself."

She went out of the room and down the stairs, but she forgot about going to the nurse. For the first time in her life she had a strong desire to be in a particular place. Always before it was only the music she wanted, but now she wanted the railroad tracks and the grove.

It took almost an hour to get there. Then she scrambled down the cinder bank dirtying her hands and the back of her skirt, but she didn't care. She never cared about such things, but now less than ever because there was the grove and the man.

He sat leaning back against a tree, the tea in the tin can only half gone, now lukewarm and forgotten. A drop of saliva trickled from his open mouth, his hands lay palms up, dirty with the grime of weeks or months even. He sat as if asleep, only not asleep.

Nina touched his shoulder gently. "I'm here," she said, and then, when he didn't move, she sat down facing him.

He woke to her slowly, easily, and looked at her without surprise. "N . . . never . . . one before . . . only me," he said.

"Now us," Nina said.

His eyes opened wider now and his forehead puckered in concentration. "There's some . . . something between us we must . . . *must* find."

"I saw this place," she said.

"I know."

"Is that what you mean?"

"No. More than that." His face

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relaxed again. He closed his eyes. "I can't think. I haven't done it for so long now." He handed her the can of cold tea. "Want some?" Then he sank back against the tree, gone again.

She took the tea and drank it all, strong and bitter, and then she lay down on her back and looked at the clouds. After a moment she closed her eyes too, and drifted with the music and the poem, but it was different now because he was beside her and there were two of them. Maybe this was the way to find it, the thing between them.

Nina's mother waited and waited, and then her father came home and they ate supper, leaving a part of the meal warm in the oven.

"Maybe she just forgot. She sometimes does."

"But not usually as late as this."

"Wait a bit longer and we'll see. She's been worse than ever these last days."

They called her classmates then but all they heard about was the bad, bad time in school where she was worse than ever before and the teacher couldn't wake her for a while. And finally they said what they had thought about before and they called the police about the crazy tramp who had looked that way at Nina.

It grew late and still no one found Nina or had news of her. After a while her father took the gun and Mr. Morton came and the man from across the street and they all went out together to help hunt.

If the police had found them it might have been different, but it was her father. This grove was a place where tramps came now and then, and so they looked there after other places. It was late, after midnight, and they found them asleep side by side.

They woke to stare into the gun and the lights.

Her father poked the gun in the man's ribs hard and called him bad names and swore. The man sat up, blinking and squinting.

"Kidnaper! Rapist!"

"You're in real trouble now, you crazy bum."

"Let me show him," her father said and pushed the rifle hard into his ribs again and into his stomach.

He rolled over. Their grasping fingers held rotten, tearing cloth, and he was running, high-kneed, wobbly and not very fast.

Nina got up too then and tried to follow but one of them held her. Her father raised his gun and shot at the running figure twice.

Nina cried out. "We found . . . some . . . thing. We found it and now it's gone."

"Dirty rapist!"

"He never . . . even . . . no . . . no."

The men were shadow figures in a dream. She closed her eyes. This was the music.

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*

She had chopped her hair off. She was dressed like a boy. Flat-chested and slim-hipped still, she was sexless. Under the dirt and pallor it was hard to see the youth of her face. She could almost be any age.

She walked as a scarecrow might walk, lifting her feet high and slapping them down, but the expression on her face was not blank or dumb, more like someone in a trance, lips parted, eyes half closed, head thrown back.

There must be others. There must be because they were no good alone. They meant nothing as one, but more than one began something new and bigger. What might three or four make? She didn't know, but she would look and she would find them.

Coming Next Month

Remember Father John Carmody, the shrewd, twinkling interstellar priest of Philip José Farmer's *Attitudes* (F&SF, October, 1953) and *Father* (F&SF, July, 1955)? Carmody was not always in Holy Orders; and you'll learn the facts of his strangely, even shockingly un-priestlike early life in Farmer's new short novel, *The Night of Light*—a vivid and powerful story of an alien culture, alien gods and alien moralities. Our June issue (on the stands around May 1) will also feature Bertram Chandler's *The Cage,* a brilliant new answer to the question "What distinguishes a rational being from an animal?", plus stories by Robert Sheckley, J. T. McIntosh and others, a salute to the opening of the baseball season by Will Stanton, Charles Beaumont's quarterly round-up of s.f. films, and the first appearance in a fantasy magazine of the distinguished Pulitzer laureate (and father of TV's popular record-setting prizewinner) Mark Van Doren.

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The Science Stage

by WILLIAM MORRISON

WHAT WAS PREVIOUSLY A GOOD PLAY on television has been transformed into a smash hit on Broadway. If you saw or read* the television play, you can be assured that VISIT TO A SMALL PLANET, as it is now playing at the Booth Theatre, deserves its success. Its three expanded acts are definitely superior to the shorter ones which appeared on your home screen.

Most of the critics have ascribed the improvement solely to the comic gifts of Cyril Ritchard and Eddie Mayehoff. Certainly they share much of the credit, Ritchard as both director and visitor from outer space, and Mayehoff as a grunting, snorting, wheezing, whining and nasally high-pitched singing general whose chief enemy in this world is a profanely described rival who covets his office in the Pentagon. Without their talents, the play would be a much poorer thing. But what Mr. Vidal contributed to the change was far from negligible. And then there was the contribution of the theatre itself, as contrasted with television.

Anthony Boucher, in his introduction to the printed television version, mentioned that because the play's iconocyastic spirit was poison to the advertising agencies, it was by far Mr. Vidal's most difficult TV opus to sell. But Broadway, whatever its other troubles may be, is not yet run by advertising agencies, and Broadway audiences do not lead quite such sheltered lives as inveterate TV addicts. Mr. Vidal has therefore been able to introduce a great deal more of what the agencies and their sponsors don't like. The dialogue is thoroughly saturated with irreverence for the sacred cows of the air waves (including the sacred cow Mother), and to the theatre irreverence has always been the breath of life.

In adapting a relatively short television script—I don't know what the actual running time was, commercials excluded—Mr. Vidal ran the danger of getting tangled in added plot twists or in stifling his actors in padded dialogue. He escaped both dangers by the simple, if difficult, expedient of keeping the plot pretty much as it was and using the extra time that Broadway put at his disposal to create more thorough comic characterizations. Messrs. Ritchard and Mayehoff are wonderfully funny entertainers. Let us not forget, however, that Mr. Vidal gave them the material to be funny with. Perhaps he did-

*F&SF, March, 1957.

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n't write into the play all the details of Mr. Mayehoff's wheezing and grunting and mugging, or of Mr. Ritchard's suave man-out-of-the-world manner. But he did give them the perfect opportunity to display their antics. And that is not always an easy feat for an author to accomplish.

One of the oddities, not of the play itself, but of the producers' approach to it, is that in the desire to appeal to the most general audience, the science fiction aspect is being soft-pedaled. One reason for this may lie in the earlier failure of NIGHT OF THE AUK, and the resulting equation, by some critics, of science fiction to dreary dullness. Actually, VISIT is science fiction at its best. Its appeal is not limited to a small group of specially conditioned fans but will be felt by any one who can respond to the play of imaginative humor. Some of the old standbys are there—the impenetrable force-field, the visitor's ability to read or listen to minds, his possession of strange powers which to mere Earthlings seem magical, but they are presented with tongue at least partly in cheek. Like the rest of the play, they are intended not to astound but to amuse.

I may add that the little the play has lost in terms of science fiction has been made up for by a liberal dash of sex. I imagine that this was done on the theory that sex is as obligatory in a play that aims for commercial success as an olive is in a Martini. It doesn't particularly harm VISIT, but it isn't really the thing that most customers come to see. I can't say, however, that I heard any one objecting to its being there, especially when it takes the form of Sarah Marshall.

All in all, VISIT is a consistently amusing play, with a number of scenes that are a wonderful reduction to absurdity of certain human customs. Mr. Vidal is exceedingly vague about the inhuman customs of his Visitors. But I think he tells us quite enough for an enjoyable evening.

VISIT TO A SMALL PLANET, *by Gore Vidal. Directed by Cyril Ritchard; setting by Oliver Smith; lighting by Feder; presented by George Axelrod and Clinton Wilder.*

GENERAL TOM POWERS	*Eddie Mayehoff*
ROGER SPELDING	*Philip Coolidge*
REBA SPELDING	*Sibyl Bowan*
ELLEN SPELDING	*Sarah Marshall*
CONRAD MAYBERRY	*Conrad Janis*
KRETON	*Cyril Ritchard*
AIDE	*Bob Gothie*
ROSEMARY (*a cat*)	*Grenadier Saadi*
CAMERAMAN	*Earl Montgomery*
SOUND MAN	*John Hallow*
A FRIEND	*Francis Bethencourt*

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Even Ward Moore's most serious and disturbing stories show welcome glints of observant humor, but rarely to such an extent as in this delightful fantasy of psychiatry and wish-fulfilment—which still manages seriously to suggest a notion or two as to the true nature of

Adjustment

by WARD MOORE

DR. GAYLER'S EXPLANATIONS WERE superfluous; I understood fully. I've looked through enough books with case histories (Charles X, 24, pronounced hyperthyroid, had recurrent dreams of driving Mary Y down a narrow dirt road in a bathtub) to know that the identities of patients are deliberately obscured. Anyway, curiosity—beyond the normal desire for useful information—isn't a vice of mine. In fact I rather pride myself on not having vices. I'm not the kind who boasts of smoking two packs a day or getting drunk Saturday nights, gambling, or having affairs. I try to lead a clean, decent life, and I'm not ashamed of having been a Boy Scout or a member of the Epworth League.

"You're the nearest we have found to a completely adjusted individual," he said.

I wished he would come to the point. I don't find psychiatrists' offices fascinating; quite the contrary. The advanced paintings on the walls gave me astigmatism. The readable magazines like *Life* and the *National Geographic* were out of date; the unreadable ones, *Accent, Partisan Review, Could,* I thought better left unread. I wasn't bored; no sensible person allows himself to get that way. But if I had, Dr. Gayler and his office would have brought it on.

"You went through high school with an average grade of B; you graduated from D—— twenty-fifth in a class of fifty. You were immediately hired by the—"

"Fifth National Bank of Republic City. Where I still work."

"You live with your widowed mother, F—— S——," he filled in. "For whom you bought a new washing machine from Sears—"

"Shouldn't that be S—— R——?" Perhaps I don't guffaw at stupid jokes, but I have a sense of humor.

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"Possibly," conceded Dr. Gayler. "And other household conveniences, on which you owe a balance of—"

"I've never been a day behind on my payments."

"I'm sure of that. Believe me, I'm not playing back facts you already know just to—"

"Then why are you? I don't want to be rude, Doctor, and I can't pretend my time is valuable to anyone but myself—"

"There's a year's salary for two weeks of your time in this for you, Mr. Squith. Two weeks in pleasant, if dull, surroundings, with room, board and laundry thrown in."

"I'm in no position to take two weeks off from the bank."

He smiled and leaned back. "My patient has a close relative who owns a bit of stock in the Fifth National. There'll be no trouble about a vacation with pay."

"Do you mind explaining just what it is you want of me?"

"Not at all, Mr. Squith. My patient is a young man of your own age—"

"Twenty-six." I knew he knew I was born in 1934, but I said it anyway.

"Exactly. Unfortunately he lacks your stability. He is, in fact, slightly, ah, disturbed."

"Insane," I said bluntly. There's no use beating around the bush. Call a spade a spade.

"Not at all. Of course the term has been outmoded for a long time; even so, my patient is not psychotic in the way I think you mean. He has to some extent lost contact with reality—"

"Thinks he's Napoleon?"

Dr. Gayler smiled again. "An infrequent delusion; personally I've never come across it. No, his divorce from reality is more subtle. He knows who he is and in what century he's living. However, he has not been able to accept the disagreeable aspects of life. As you and I do. So he has withdrawn into a world of his own devising—"

"You mean he has hallucinations?"

When I refused his proffered cigarette he lit one himself. "Let's not bother with words that mean different things at different times. Let's just say he has withdrawn."

"All right," I agreed. "I still don't see where I come in."

"I could use several different techniques to help him adjust. Hypnosis. Extended psychoanalysis. Drugs. All time-taking, none entirely satisfactory. However, there is a new method with good results reported. You might call it facsimile-therapy, if you wanted to be facetious."

I didn't want to be facetious. "Being around someone normal will make him normal too?"

He blew smoke through his nostrils before snubbing out the cigarette. "If it were that simple, all sorts of problems would have

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stopped existing long ago. It would do my patient little good just to observe a man who has no trouble accepting reality—a balanced person like yourself—to listen and talk, on no matter how intimate a basis. He must be convinced of the happiness of an adjusted man. He must see into the sound mind, to understand how it can accept what his own has rejected. To put it on—metaphorically—to impose it over his own, as one puts a cast on a broken leg to hold the bones and muscles in the proper place while it heals."

I wasn't too pleased at having my mind compared to a plaster cast. Not that I regard myself as a Thinker with a capital T. Intellectuals with round shoulders and spindly legs are just as unwholesome as the opposite. A sound mind in a sound body is my motto.

Still, Dr. Gayler had a point, no matter how clumsily made. Anyone afraid to face the rough and tumble of everyday life must be soft, not to say weak; reinforcement from a man of character was bound to help. I could imagine easily enough what his patient must be like: too much money, and not enough to occupy his time. Dissipated surely, incapable of simple enjoyments; slack-jawed and shifty-eyed.

I was both right and wrong, as I discovered after I talked with Mr. McIlforth—our Cashier and my immediate superior—and decided to accept Dr. Gayler's proposition. I'm afraid I wasn't entirely truthful to my Mother when I explained I was going away on business for two weeks, but then I wasn't entirely untruthful either. At any rate, I packed my bag and arrived at the sanitarium before dinnertime. Dr. Gayler shook hands, a formality I thought rather superfluous, and introduced me to Robert Wais.

Shifty-eyed he was not, but I'm afraid dissipated was accurate. As soon as we were alone (did I say the arrangement called for sharing the same quarters?) he asked, "What about a drink, kid? I'm parched."

I don't like being called kid, and I never take anything but a glass of beer on a warm evening or a toast to auld lang syne on New Year's Eve. "Surely there's some rule in this place against—"

"Not a one." He brought out a bottle and got a tumbler from the bathroom. "That is, not for me, and I guess what goes for me goes for you too. Sky's the limit; drink hearty. Sorry I haven't got anything better than this"—he held up the bottle and I read the famous label which is advertised by testimonials from important people who would have been better advised to avoid alcohol, but of whose taste in liquor there can be no doubt—"but you just can't get decent stuff on this side."

"This side of what?" I asked.

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He stared at me over the rim of his glass. "Don't hand me a line. I'm here because I made a deal with my family and that head-shrinker, not because they have me fooled. They kept pestering me till they wore me down and I said I'd give this guff a try if they'd leave me alone afterward."

He was far gone, clearly. "I don't care for any, but don't let me stop you."

"Ease your mind." He tossed the whisky down, shuddering, and refilled the glass. "So you're to be my model? Two weeks, and I'll be like you?"

Since the poor fellow was not right in his mind, I refused to take offence. "I don't think—" I began, when he came over and clutched my elbow with his free hand.

"Kid," he said, "give it to me straight. What do you really think of the Dodgers this year?"

It wasn't a question I would have expected. "I don't follow baseball closely—football's my game. But aren't the Braves and the Giants—"

"Yah!" he snorted, turning away. I didn't anticipate my two weeks here would be fun; I expected, in fact, to earn what I was being paid; but the close company of a boor was even more objectionable than that of a lunatic. I always say it costs very little to be polite, whether you mean it or not.

He whirled around. "Typical of this side," he commented bitterly. "Brooklyn in fifth place. Fifth place—the second division! Satchel Paige retired and Walter Johnson forgotten. Lavangetto coaching in the bush leagues. Robinson selling Chock Full O' Nuts. Lies, lies! They spend all their time making them up. Do you know what?" He came closer, and whispered. "They even say Matisse is dead and Picasso hasn't given up painting for sculpture!"

For the first time it occurred to me—as it should have sooner—that he might become violent. And the room, more like that of a hotel than a hospital, had no bell to summon attendants, only a phone, and Wais was not far gone enough for me to scream through it for help. Yet his wild talk made me nervous. Brooklyn was in fifth place; Paige, Johnson, Lavangetto and Robinson were forgotten except by nostalgic sportswriters. Matisse . . . Matisse . . . A painter; I was sure I'd read an obituary, and while I didn't go in for grotesque painting, I was pretty sure Picasso hadn't taken up sculpture.

I was relieved when they wheeled in a dumb-waiter with our dinner. There was service for three; Dr. Gayler joined us. Now we were in his hands his manner was less authoritative than placatory, as though he were wheedling us into liking him and making the experiment succeed. He chatted amiably, addressing us by our given names, which might have been

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confusing except that he called Wais "Robert" and me "Bob." He talked to me of utilities bonds, about which he seemed reasonably well-informed, until Wais showed signs of restlessness, whereupon he turned to him to discuss the music of Schoenberg.

Though this was clearly more to Wais's taste, he was restless, and it wasn't long before he threw himself back in his chair and said petulantly, "Let's get on with it, Doc. Give us the needle or put us in a trance, hand out the pills, or start the free association spinning."

Dr. Gayler looked pained. "Sorry you got the idea drugs or hypnosis were to be used. All I want you to do is relax and permit the empathic currents to flow between you. Let yourself look into Bob's mind."

Wais grunted. "X-rays or telepathy?"

"Call it osmosis if you like," said Gayler genially. "Just don't resist the process."

Wais picked up a book—poetry from the slimness of it—and throwing himself down on the couch, began reading.

Happily his discourtesy wasn't always so open. Or perhaps its scope depended on his moods, for the next day he acted very differently. "One day gone," he announced jovially; "only thirteen to go. Like being marooned on a desert island except we know when the rescue ship's coming. When I was a boy I thought it would be the ideal life, didn't you?"

"I was always too busy for daydreaming," I confessed. "I had a stamp collection, an erector set, model airplanes. And there were scouts and games and shows. And when I went to high school I began selling magazine subscriptions and doing odd jobs. I was never what they used to call an introvert."

I was prepared for some sarcastic remark; instead he began asking personal questions, not rudely, but with genuine interest. His attention overcame my initial reticence; I soon found myself telling him about Mother, and the bank, and how Mr. McIlforth once said I had a natural flair for trust deeds. I'm afraid I went very close to the edge of good taste in mentioning Alice and our tentative agreement, contingent on so many factors that it was unlikely we would be able to marry for years.

He shuddered. "How can you stand it? Doing the same things, day after day?"

"They aren't the same things," I explained. "Each day is different, especially in the bank. It's not like a factory where you repeat the identical operation over and over. It's a job full of new and rich experience. Every aspect of human nature is revealed to the man in the bank: hopes, ambitions, troubles, catastrophes; thrift, honesty, astuteness, courage . . ."

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"You find all this in the complacent people who come in clutching their bankbooks and deposits. In the anxious, fawning seekers of loans?"

"Yes, because everyone comes to the bank. Plumbers and housewives, executives and clerks. Depositors and borrowers aren't a class apart: they're Everyman."

He shook his head. "You too can discover romance." He pondered for a moment. "And planning to spend the rest of your life with one woman."

"It's customary," I remarked with some irony.

"All is custom, as Herodotus said. If you were a Muslim it would be four."

"I think not. Debauchery is debauchery in any time or place. Just because something is legal or customary doesn't make it right."

"Ha! Where's your celebrated adjustment now?"

We didn't understand each other, as you can see. We had little in common. Yet in spite of his eccentricities we got along fairly well. I could hardly approve of his habits or extremely controversial ideas, but apart from them I found him likable in a way. I even tolerated his irrational aversion to television —there was supposed to be a set in our quarters, but he peremptorily ordered it out—and his distracting habit of listening to snippets of baseball broadcasts, always turning them off angrily when the behavior of the Brooklyn team or the decision of an umpire displeased him.

"Absurd!" he would rage.

"Well, there isn't much you can do about it."

He gave me a scornful look. "That's what you think." And he would leave the room abruptly.

I couldn't imagine where he went, for though the sanitarium resembled a good hotel, it provided no social recreation, no place where one guest could meet others. There was neither a communal dining room, a moving picture hall, nor other facilities for the gregarious. And he volunteered no information until the first week had passed. It was a particularly disastrous game for the Dodgers, who seemed to have done everything possible to deserve their alternate nickname except put in pinch hitters for their heaviest batters. Wais gave a disgusted click of the switch. "Deal or no deal, I'm going to listen where I can get a decent broadcast of a decent game."

I puzzled over that one. If he couldn't get what he wanted there it was hard to imagine where he could. The radio he'd substituted for the thirty-inch TV was one of those custom jobs that do everything but the laundry. It had AM, FM, shortwave and all possible bands; if there were Martian or Venerian broadcasts I'm sure it would have brought them in. And he had never mentioned any inter-

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est in cricket, lacrosse, jai-alai, or the esoteric sports of the Mysterious East. The more I thought of it, the less sense it made.

It was no use to tell myself I couldn't expect a mentally unbalanced individual to make sense. Because I had come, perhaps grudgingly, to learn that Robert Wais, for all his odd poses and eccentricities, usually made sense of a sort. It might not be Mrs. McIlforth's or Dr. Gayler's, but within his own frame of reference it was coherent and logical. I didn't particularly like him, nor was I sympathetic toward his moods, whims and notions. But in the peculiar atmosphere of close contact I had seen enough of him and talked with him sufficiently to come a long way from my snap judgement in Dr. Gayler's office that he was insane. Rude, brusque, moody, opinionated, out of step with everybody—certainly. But mad? I doubted it more all the time.

Yet the implications of his childish exclamations and exits were tantalizing. Where did he go? What did he do when he got there? Then, as though to aggravate my interest still further, on the ninth day of Dr. Gayler's "experiment"—I use quotes around the word simply because, so far as I could see, there was nothing more to it than just throwing us together—he muttered, "I'm fed up with this stuff; I'm in the mood for Fred Allen, or even Groucho Marx."

I can pick up a gag as quickly as the next man. "I wouldn't mind a half hour of Bob Hope myself," I said. "Unfortunately for us, Allen passed away, Hope's retired, and Marx isn't on the air Mondays."

"You do believe all the lies they tell you on this side, don't you? Maybe it makes you happy or something. Would I be happy to recapture that lost innocence and give up everything that makes life interesting?" He didn't wait for me to answer the rhetorical question.

A week earlier I would have shrugged it off as pure nonsense, but I had come to see a certain consistency in Wais's speech and actions. Perhaps he had tapes or records of some of the old comedians. Though, if he did, why not play them on the machine in the room? His reference to "lies on this side" could be dismissed readily enough; still . . .

Next afternoon he complained of a bad headache. I wasn't surprised: he had been drinking the night before; no matter what he said about the hair of the dog, common sense told me more of the same wouldn't help. "Better take a rest," I suggested.

"Rest is all I get. I must have been out of my mind to come here. Anyway, I want to hear the Dodger-Red Sox game today."

It took me a moment to orient

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myself. "You mean the Dodger-Giant game. You had it on this morning, don't you remember? You shut it off in a huff when the Brooklyn pitcher was knocked out of the box. I got it back on after you left, and for your information, the Bums lost, nine to one."

He waved his arm. "Oh, that. I'm not going to listen to any more of those phony broadcasts."

Did he think— "Anyway, how could you hear a Brooklyn-Red Sox game? It isn't spring: no exhibition games. And they aren't in the same league, if you remember."

"I remember," he said. "There's nothing wrong with my memory."

"Well, then—" I began.

"Look: conversation makes me dizzy. Be a good fellow and run up and listen to the game. Tell me how it comes out."

"Run up where?"

He closed his eyes. "You'll find it."

My first impulse was to ignore him and retire with a copy of *Time* or *Coronet*. Naturally I was irritated. Cryptic remarks have much the same annoying effect as experimental poetry. Logic furnishes no key with which to puzzle them out. "It" could only refer to an electronic device but (leaving aside the question of why he would have installed it elsewhere) the bland assumption that I would find it "up there" (on the next floor, on the roof, in the sky?) was exasperating in its indefiniteness. Perhaps it was sheer annoyance that sent me forth; certainly I had no expectation of finding anything.

"Up" implied use of a stairway; beyond this, reason offered little help. Feeling somewhat foolish, and keeping an eye open for Dr. Gayler or one of the residents or nurses—trusting a plausible explanation of my presence would pop into my head—I mounted the broad flight of steps which narrowed arbitrarily to a landing. I stared down a long hall at close-set, indistinguishable doors. On impulse I walked to the third on the right and turned the knob.

I cannot say the room I entered was dark. Neither was it light. Silly as it sounds, the only words I could think of to describe it were the Biblical ones: *"without form, and void."* There was one exception to the amorphousness, the vagueness of the room. There was a single focal point of clarity and distinctness at the opposite end, chest-high: a cabinet with dials and speakers, but no knobs.

". . . now we come to the top of the Brooklyn batting order; Gil Hodges in the box, Snider on deck. Last of the seventh here at New Ebbets Field in this crucial game of the 1960 World Series. One out, Reese on first. Ruth winds up with his eye on the runner. The throw to first—not in time. Back on the mound; the pitch—low and inside: ball one. . . ."

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A cumbersome joke; what for? The 1960 World Series wouldn't be played for more than three months, and the present standings of both Brooklyn and Boston ruled them out—except mathematically—as possible contestants. This imaginary broadcast, with the background sound effects of the crowd, must have been made by Wais for his amusement. Not for mine, certainly.

". . . Reese takes a big lead off first. Here comes the pitch—foul! The count is—" The machine gave a click like a hiccup. *"This is not a record or a transcription of any kind; this is the actual voice of Red Barber, brought to you by the Gillette Safety Company. Men! Look sharp . . ."*

A silly business, though adding the last statement to the counterfeit was ingenious. And it was a pleasant fancy to introduce the old greats—all retired now, of course, except manager Reese—into the Brooklyn lineup; a touch of imagination to ignore the conversion of Ruth to an outfielder.

So this was where Wais spent his time. A strange place; one most people wouldn't care for. Yet I could understand how it served as a refuge, a relief from the routine of the sanitarium and the limited imagination of Dr. Gayler. Not very comfortable, perhaps, with nothing to sit on—

Something nudged the calves of my legs. Startled, I turned. One of those wrought iron and canvas moderne things was just behind me. How I had failed to see it before was a mystery. I sat down somewhat gingerly. If this was all there was, there was no use complaining.

I was still bothered by the unsubstantiality of the room. Surely there ought to be windows? I sniffed automatically: the air was fresh and temperate. Evidently a ventilating system of some kind was introducing, controlling and purifying the air, doing away with the necessity for windows. However, this didn't account for the absence of light, or of walls—

". . . Ruth, head down, walks in from the mound. Grover Cleveland Alexander marches jauntily from the bullpen to see if he can . . ."

But there was light, I now noticed, a concealed, diffused light, without glare or the yellow or blue quality of any artificial light I knew. As for walls, there were—no, there *was* a wall. A single wall, for the room, a large, in fact an enormous one, was circular in shape. I didn't care for it, though I know such a form is, at least theoretically, more economical and efficient. The wall gave it a solidity I welcomed; there is nothing more confusing than a room which seems to stretch out into endless space. There was a ceiling too, I realized, but as I looked up at it I felt my face reddening. I'm not

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excessively squeamish, but what I saw painted there, the nymphs and satyrs, gods and goddesses, shepherds and shepherdesses, was so frankly erotic and lascivious that I quickly looked down from the signature, *"J. Fragonard, pinxit,"* to the floor, which I now perceived was covered by a tapestry carpet repeating the same indecent themes.

There was no question the room represented Wais's sensual and decadent tastes. Pictures, hung on flat projections from the round wall, were the kind any kindergarten child—but no; any child of any age would have more restraint.

Except for the space occupied by the radio and an extensive bar stocked with bottles of varying sizes and shapes, brands I never saw on billboards or the backs of magazines, the rest of the wall was taken up by books, no two uniform. One would think that in collecting a large library space would be given to sets of standard authors in good-looking bindings, but there were none.

". . . Crack! Did you hear it? Campanella connected with that one! Hodges is coming in to score; Snider's rounding third; Robinson's already passed second . . ."

I walked over to the bookcases. *Sophia Scarlett* by Stevenson; *The Real Life of Rumbold Raysting* by Dickens; *Left at Home* by Ring Lardner; Douglas Freeman's *Calhoun*—books assuredly never sponsored by any book club. Where had he gotten such curiosities? Why bring them to the sanitarium?

A door, not the one by which I had entered, opened. Through it came a ravishing young woman —I speak impersonally, as a matter of esthetics—clothed in a veil hiding nothing whatever. Her full, wide mouth smiled in a manner at once timid and inviting.

"Lord!" she exclaimed; "my heart beats again, now that you are here once more. Your lovesick slave is overwhelmed with joy and gratitude for your return." To my embarrassment, she threw herself to the carpet at my feet, twining her arms around my ankles.

I recovered my balance, if not my assurance. "There must be some mistake, Miss. I'm afraid I haven't the pleasure of knowing you—"

"Oh, my lord, my beloved, my master," she wailed, without releasing her grip or raising her face. "What have I done to displease you? What is my fault that I no longer find favor in your sight? Oh beat me, hurt me—but do not deny me."

"Please Miss," I mumbled; "there's a misunderstanding somewhere. Believe me, I— Come now, get up. You must be uncomfortable like that. There are always drafts on the floor. Let me introduce myself: I'm Robert—"

"Of course you are Robert, my life. Could you think your misera-

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ble Ariadne had forgotten you? Even though you act so strange and cold? Oh master, take me back again—"

". . . And so that packs up another World Series for the World Champion Brooklyn Club. There will be joy in Flatbush, Bushwick, Greenpoint and even Canarsie tonight . . ."

I felt this was intrusive at the moment. "How do you turn that thing off?" I asked. "Or at least get it on to something else?"

"Aren't you happy the Dodgers won, my king?"

"I don't give a da—excuse me, I mean I don't care one way or the other. It's all a rib. You, too; I suppose you work in a nightclub. Though I didn't think they wore this sort of thing even there."

Her cry was pure distress, which she didn't corrupt with tears. "I'll take it off, master; I'll wear nothing that offends you." And she be-began to do so.

"No, no," I objected quickly. "Keep it on. You might get chilled. Haven't you got anything a little more—ah—opaque to put on top of it?"

"Anything my liege fancies," she answered. "A sarong?"

"I was thinking of something more in the way of a dress, or a—you know—housecoat, or . . . or . . ."

The radio (or whatever it was) said, *"This is a recording of the Mozart Forty-fourth Piano Concerto, K723; the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Arthur Nikisch; the solo part by Hans von Bülow."*

"A housecoat!" cried Ariadne. "Truly I have become hideous in your eyes. And what of your other slaves and concubines?"

"My— Good heavens! Are there more of you?"

"You are joking, lord. The thought of Phyllis, Daphne, Chloe, Iphigenia and Leda brightens your eyes."

Six concubines! Bluebeard, no less. "You better send them away," I said.

She looked up at me, utter shock on her lovely face. "You would condemn them to death?"

"What? You mean they'd die away from here?"

"They—or I—would die away from you, light of our world. Naturally."

Being accountable for the lives of six young women—at least I assumed they must be young—was a new and frightening responsibility. For the first time since I entered the circular room I was tempted to turn back. But if I did, Wais would continue to tempt these creatures into a life of depravity. The least I could do was counteract his influence. "Where are they?"

"Why, awaiting your pleasure, master. Will you sport with us in the pool?"

"Certainly not!" Bathing suits

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would be more respectable than what Ariadne was wearing, but by now I was ready to believe they might be considered superfluous around here. "Pool? On the third floor of a sanitarium?"

"I don't know why you speak and act so strangely, lord; but since it is your will it is mine also. And if I have become repulsive, the others may still gladden you."

What was the use of trying to explain to the poor girl that I was no fiend, but a normal and—at least informally — an engaged man? I followed her through the doorway into another and even bigger room, round like the first, except for two moon-shaped bites out of its sides to accommodate other circular rooms. It too was indirectly lit and airconditioned; most of its area was taken up by a turquoise pool formed like a figure 8.

I hesitate to mention this for fear of being misunderstood, but it was a different set of figures which held my eye. As I had uneasily anticipated, the other five had less on than Ariadne. A great deal less. They were unqualifiedly naked.

What startled me more than their unclad state was their diversity. Ariadne's eyes were the color of the pool; her hair was like rust in the sun; her body—as I couldn't help observing—had the delicate luster of old parchment, except that it was warm and glowing. Leda—I soon learned their names as they clung to me, entreating me to favor them with my smile—was deep, dark brown, the tint and texture of a bronze iris in the shade. Chloe was Chinese; perfectly formed, exquisite, vivacious. There was no doubt about Iphigenia's being a Eurasian, with the delicate complexion and faultless features of the Malay predominating. Blonde Daphne belied the vacuity the word so often implies; black-haired, dark-eyed Phyllis—languid, magnificent—was frightening.

They clustered about me, laughing, teasing, cajoling. Phyllis knelt to untie my shoes, hiding them in a deluge of rippling hair. Leda struggled with my jacket; Chloe removed my tie and unbuttoned my shirt; Iphigenia and Daphne busied themselves also. Their intention was only too clear: they expected me to join them in the water—without swimming trunks.

"Ladies, wait!" I gasped. "I—I don't care for this sort of thing. Honestly."

Their beautiful faces fell. "Lord," pleaded Daphne, "are you tired of us?"

No one could have been cruel enough to answer yes. Besides, it would have been inaccurate; how could I be tired of them when we had just met? "No, no—certainly not. I'm just not in the mood for swimming at the moment."

Leda kissed my ear and whispered something in it which made

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me jump. Hesitantly Ariadne made a still more scandalous suggestion; I'm sure she could not have realized its outrageousness; Chloe clapped her hands: "I know—you would like a drink."

"If you mean alcohol," I said, retying my tie, "I would not. However if there is some Coca Cola round here . . ."

They surveyed each other with questioning dismay. Iphigenia repeated, "Co-ca-co la?"

"A harmless and refreshing beverage." I shook my head at their ignorance. "I see there isn't. Never mind; it's all right."

"Our king must have whatever he wishes," exclaimed Ariadne.

"Please don't bother," I said, discomposed at their eagerness to serve me.

"Master, we exist only to do your bidding," insisted Leda. "If we cannot satisfy your wants, we have no purpose."

"Here is your co-ca-co-la, liege," murmured Chloe, casting down her eyes after giving me what I can only describe as a shattering look.

And to be sure, there was the familiar pinch-waisted bottle on a tray in her hands. I drank it gratefully, though it was warm, not wishing to hurt them with criticism; almost immediately Phyllis appeared with another bottle, obviously refrigerated, accompanied by a glass half-full of ice cubes.

They were so overjoyed at this success in catering to my inclination that they became quite unrestrained. I regret to say they tried to drag me into the next room, a glimpse of which I caught through the opened door. It too was round. Mirror-walled and -ceiled, it gave back an infinite number of images of a circular bed, heaped high with pillows in the center. I could not allow myself to speculate on their designs.

"Ladies," I said firmly, "if we are to be friends, and continue to enjoy these accommodations together—or more accurately, at the same time—we must come to an understanding. I'm sure, in your natural innocence, you don't realize how this scene would look to an outsider. Evil to him who evil thinks, of course, but why give even the appearance of evil?"

"But there is no one to see," Leda pointed out.

"All the more reason for discretion," I said. "If we did what was right only while people were watching, what would the world come to?"

Phyllis' eyes filled with tears; her regal head drooped. "What have we done wrong, lord? Tell us, so we may avoid offending you."

She looked so pitiful that I began to reach out with a brotherly pat of reassurance. But the sudden light in her eyes was so far from being sisterly that I was able to recollect her lack of attire in time, and draw back before touching the

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bare shoulder. "You haven't done anything wrong. Nothing at all. Simply as a matter of—ah—decorum, I think we ought to make some changes around here."

Daphne said, "Your wish is our law."

This was a trifle undemocratic but not entirely disagreeable. After all, they were lucky to have someone like myself, instead of an unstable character who would take advantage of them. "Let's begin then, by putting on suitable clothing; the common cold is a menace. And I do think you'll be more comfortable in bathing suits when you use the pool. And we can be perfectly friendly without excessive physical contact. Really, that's all. Oh—except possibly it might be better (this is just a suggestion) if you did up your hair, or perhaps cut it short. It seems so—mmm—*abandoned,* hanging down loose like that."

Ariadne, whom I somehow hadn't missed, suddenly reappeared. The transformation left me breathless. She had not accepted my advice about a housecoat; instead she wore slacks and a sweater, both tight. Her hair was piled up, with a few curls spilling down over one ear and cheek. And she carried the delicious odor of good perfume instead of the distracting natural scents which had been perceptible earlier. "Does this content my liege?" she asked modestly.

I tried to be entirely objective. "It's a great improvement. Perhaps, though, if you were to wear a girdle and bra . . ."

"Master," repeated Daphne tragically, "your wish is our law."

I retreated to the first room, leaving them to their privacy. There was a big moral problem involved. I could take care of the comparatively simple matter of seeing that we did nothing disgraceful, but their evident passion for me was something else again. It hardly seemed fair to torment them with my constant presence when nothing could come of it, yet Ariadne had said that to banish them would be to destroy them. It was a dilemma. If only there were not six of them. *Six . . . !*

Shaking my head, I absently pulled a book from the shelves, *Novel Three* by Henry Roth, and let the pages run under my thumb. I really haven't time to read many books, and what I have can't be wasted on fiction. I understand writers are paid by the word, so it's only natural for them to turn out as many as possible; for the busy man, practical publishers hire specialists to reduce them to compact form. I put *Novel Three* back on the shelf, and picked up the thin volume next to it. It was *Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* condensed by Somerset Maugham, a neat hundred pages of large type. I promised myself I would certainly dip into it someday.

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Phyllis entered, rather subdued. I was delighted to see she had not only cut her hair and put on clothes, but had taken my hint about foundation garments. Generously proportioned women like Phyllis particularly need such restraints. "You look very nice," I complimented.

I'm afraid I spoke with more enthusiasm than I intended, or else she misinterpreted my tone. I was forced to explain that what she took for granted as the inevitable consequence of my polite remark was both licentious and illicit. I had to insist my preference for clothes was not a matter of their putting them on for me to take off.

Paradoxically, I felt like a brute. She finally dried her eyes and murmured, "Master, may we serve you food?"

I was relieved by the change of subject. "Food? Good idea. What have you got?"

"Anything you fancy, lord. Ortolans drowned in brandy; nightingales' tongues with truffles stewed in port; breast of pheasant in aspic; brook trout à la—"

"What about a nice thick steak? And french fries?"

"Yes, lord," she assented dutifully.

It seemed hardly a minute before they all came in with the sizzling porterhouse on a smoking platter. They set it down on a table I hadn't noticed earlier, which, I'm glad to say, was a sensible piece of furniture resting on solid legs, not a mobile captured in flight and domesticated. Iphigenia, her finely molded nostrils dilating over the savory aroma, cut the steak into bite-size bits before I could protest I wasn't a child. Leda took them up and put them in my mouth. Chloe did the same service with the french fries, the golden brown of the potatoes blending with the paler gold of her fingers; Ariadne wiped my lips with a delicately fragrant napkin. I felt slightly ridiculous at first, but the food was good—very tender, not highly seasoned, well salted—and the attention was not unpleasant. After all, there isn't anything wrong in being fed by a group of charming girls. Especially since they were now all decently attired.

I unobtrusively let my belt out a notch. Good nourishing food never hurt anyone, but it would be wise to exercise regularly. One of the things this place needed was a rowing machine or similar apparatus, so I could take daily workouts. Another, unquestionably, was a TV screen in addition to the oddly made radio. Come to think of it, there was one right above it, after all.

"Well, ladies," I said jovially, "I think we owe ourselves some recreation. Let's have fun."

They beamed on me, and some of their former enthusiasm returned. Daphne blew me a kiss.

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"No, no. You misunderstand me. I mean entertainment. A show or a prize fight, or something like that."

The TV screen lit up; the muscular voice of Milton Cross announced the presentation of *Il Re Lear,* second in a cycle of Verdi works which would include *Fedra, Tartuffe,* and others. There was an overture which I thought rather noisy and then a group of people disguised in thoroughly undeceptive costumes began to sing. I'm not one of those who sneer at either art or opera, but there's a time and place for everything. "This isn't what I call amusement," I grumbled.

There was a great flutter of agitation among the girls. I had a passing wonder whether Alice would ever take so deep and unselfish an interest in making me contented.

The TV screen went into a nervous tizzy of wavy lines. "I'd rather see a good football game," I said, quite aware of the absurdity of the whim, since it was the baseball season.

The screen straightened out as though whacked swiftly. *"—fect football weather; crisp and clear. Notre Dame will defend the west goal. Captain George Gipp's having a last word with Coaches Rockne and Leahy now. Ready for the kickoff; backfield for Paul Brown's All-Stars: Otto Graham at quarter; Jim Thorpe and Red Grange at the halfback spots; Bronco Nagurski at full. It's a long end-over-end boot that bounces on the five, taken by Grange, the Galloping Ghost, behind his own goal line . . . "*

This was the real thing: rough, hard, vital. I settled down comfortably—the functional oddity had given way to a nice, homey, upholstered batwing—and enjoyed myself. Ariadne and Leda leaned over the top of the chair, Daphne and Iphigenia perched on the arms, Chloe and Phyllis sat at my feet. It was all very cosy.

". . . the five, picks up his interference, crosses the ten, the fifteen, helped by a beautiful block from Nagurski, on the seventeen, sidesteps a man on the twenty, the twenty-five, and still moving at the thirty, he might go all the way . . ."

After the game I taught them gin rummy—Chloe proved particularly adept and was almost as good as I—and we had a gay evening. Perhaps the only drag on my mood was the architecture and furnishings of that circular room, with its nasty ceiling and carpet and all those useless books, all so unsuitable to the sensible, harmless game.

Most annoying was that the place could have been so attractive if it hadn't been designed to flaunt its differences, its eccentricities, its abnormalities. I sketched out in my mind a plan for far less radical liv-

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ing quarters. I'm no architect, but anyone who has observed gracious homes or compact dwellings can combine the best points of what he has seen without plunging into wild, untested experiments just to prove his taste is more advanced than the accepted standard.

I had barely mentally remodeled to my satisfaction when I saw that the oversized room was actually divided up into a convenient apartment with honest corners showing their uncompromising right angles. The girls were enchanted by the improvement (as they had every reason to be) and followed me, giggling and admiring, on a quick tour of inspection. The bedroom was cheerful and neat, certainly not voluptuous; a three-quarter bed, a chest of drawers with Mother's picture on it, a TV screen where the wall and ceiling met, a magazine rack stocked with *Nation's Business, Kiplinger's,* and other useful periodicals, a bright flower print to cheer things up, and a few other homelike odds and ends.

There was a bathroom with a shower, an efficient-looking kitchen which I didn't anticipate using often since the girls' feelings might be hurt if I didn't allow them to provide the meals, and a snug living room with an overstuffed set and a contour chair; bridge and table lamps scattered around instead of concealed fixtures. On top of the TV, now reduced to manageable proportions, a clever combination light and planter was both ornamental and useful as the soft glow fell on the splayed leaves of a well-tended ficus. The floor was carpeted wall-to-wall with flowered broadloom and the ceiling was relievingly bare. There were no distorted Picassos or Modiglianis on the stippled walls, but a group of understandable paintings by Norman Rockwell and N. C. Wyeth. It was the sort of atmosphere where a man could stretch out and forget his cares.

There was also a lock on the door leading to the girls' quarters. A little to my surprise, they did not struggle very hard when I asked them to go, and snapped the latch after them. Oh, Phyllis pouted, Leda tried to hold on to my hands, and Daphne pretended she had lost one of her high-heeled shoes, but in the end I secured my privacy without too much difficulty. In fact, it was so easy I was struck with sudden suspicion. Sure enough, when I switched on the bedroom light, there was Ariadne with the covers pulled up over her head, making believe to be sound asleep.

Her attachment to me was understandable, but she is too nice a girl to go in for that sort of thing. I'm not immune to impulse myself, but my self-respect, particularly in the presence of Mother's picture, helped me not to do anything either of us would be sorry

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for later. After alternately explaining and coaxing, I finally convinced her that I didn't find her repulsive or ugly or any of the things she concluded must account for my self-control.

After she was gone I sank down into the contour chair. One thing I had to admit: it was convenient to control the TV from across the room, without fiddling with knobs. I got a very unusual program of whirling, changing pastel colors accompanied by soothing music. I thought of making myself a cup of coffee, but I didn't want to be overstimulated and kept awake.

I went to the wall-safe and glanced in at the piles of stock and bond certificates, the bundles of greenbacks, and the bags of coin. Perhaps it was childish of me to take out a canvas sack and let the freshly minted pieces run through my fingers, but it was pleasant. Not at all like handling other people's money in the bank. I was aroused from my revery by an authoritative knock on the door.

Aroused, not startled nor disturbed. It was not the girls' door, but the one leading to the sanitarium. The door was permanently closed where I was concerned. "Bob! Bob Squith! Come out." It was Dr. Gayler's voice.

"No thanks," I answered lightly. "I'm quite satisfied."

Vehemence replaced urgency. "Bob! You don't belong there. This is an unfortunate, unforeseen development. You can't be happy there; you're too well adjusted to the real world."

Real world? Philosophers have been arguing over the nature of reality for centuries, yet he had undertaken to settle the question. The man was an idiot. What could be more real than the chair in which I was lying back, or the heavy sack in my lap? "Thanks, Doctor. I'm all right."

"Listen," he importuned; "can you hear me?"

"Of course I can hear you. There's nothing wrong with my faculties."

"Certainly there isn't. You were just upset by the strain of close association with Wais. And evidently the transference worked both ways, something quite unexpected. Incidentally, he is adjusting beautifully."

"Glad to hear it," I yawned. "Maybe Mr. McIlforth will give him my old job at the bank."

"Come out now," he begged. "The longer you stay the harder it will be to reach you."

I remember Wais's vexation at being tormented by their nagging. Apparently it was going to be better for me. "That's fine," I said.

"This experience has been hard on you," he went on. "Naturally psychiatric attention will be free. And I'll see to it you get a bonus. A good bonus."

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"What do I want with a bonus?" I asked, flipping a gold double-eagle into the air and catching it skilfully. "I never had it so good."

After a long time he went away. I suppose he will come back, but it doesn't matter; I have more stamina than most people. I returned the coins to the safe and got ready for bed. Perhaps—if I can get in touch with Alice and she releases me from our understanding—I shall marry Ariadne. Except that I worry over making the other girls miserable. Especially Phyllis. And Daphne. Maybe things are better the way they are, in fact.

Let well enough alone, I always say.

Lyric for Atom-Splitters

Now I am Faust and Faust is you;
  And we the Witch who hailed Macbeth;
We have the lightnings of a god
  But not his eons. We know death,

And balanced on a tautened rope,
  Precarious, high above earth
We place our poised, foolhardy feet
  That go toward ending—came from birth.

But in this lively enterprise
  We wonder sometimes what we do
Besides achieving balance: Faust,
  I, and the Witch—and you.

DORIS PITKIN BUCK

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—Continued from other side

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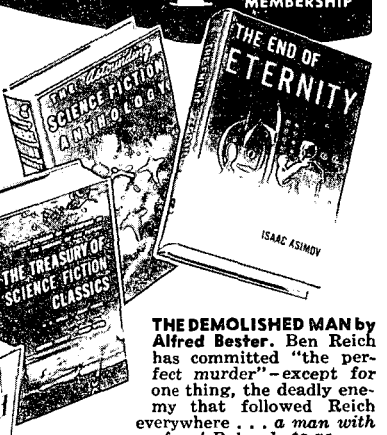
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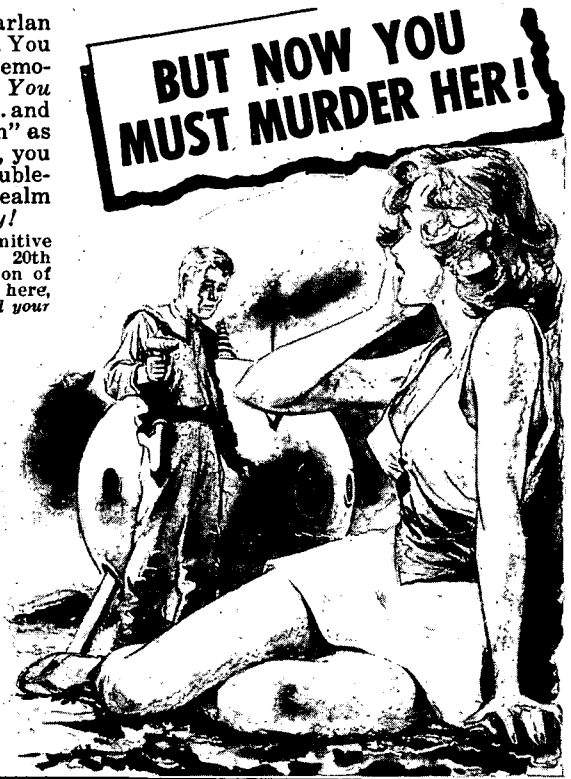

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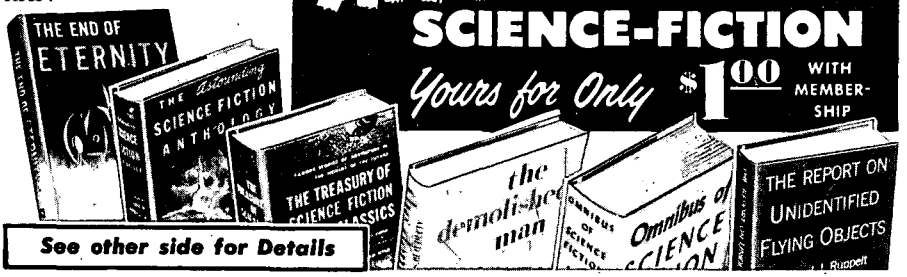
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